Violence and Performance on the Latin American Stage

by

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Abstract

“Violence and Performance on the Latin American Stage” investigates Latin American theatre of the 1960s. It focuses on violence as an inherently formal element that intersects multiple contexts. My purpose is to develop a reading that challenges traditional interpretations of Latin American avant-garde theatre. I argue that this theatre does not apply European forms to Latin American realities, but rather juxtaposes local with foreign elements in multiple domains. It connects aesthetic, philosophic, social, and political contexts through the use of violent theatrical forms.

The playwrights José Triana, Virgilio Piñera, Griselda Gambaro, and Jorge Díaz develop an aesthetics of violence that examines the ontological effects of crisis and revolution. Their characters confront questions of agency, subjectivity, historical perception, and consciousness that speak to their audiences’ experience in the sixties—I focus specifically on the Cuban revolution, Argentina’s growing socio-political violence, and Chile’s changing social demographics. I aim to show that the plays demand a simultaneous textual and contextual reading that dialogues with the multiple contexts and domains the plays intersect.

My analysis focuses on the concepts of violence and performance in order to emphasize the plays’ modernizing role within their national theatrical scenes. I examine the challenges of
theatrical writing and practice in times of conflict and social transformation, commenting on the disparaged reception of the plays’ innovative forms. I contend that this problem of reception accounts for the plays’ highly sophisticated structures of violence, which, in most cases, confused and distanced their audiences. This dissertation ultimately seeks to reveal the power of this theatre’s violent aesthetics to synthesize and critically engage with its cultural and socio-political surroundings.
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Introduction

Violence as Form

Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world…. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.

Jacques Rancière

This study focuses on the violence of Latin American theatre of the 1960s. It regards violence as an inherent formal quality that challenges the traditional understanding that the theatre of the sixties was a medium of protest. It seeks to examine specific Latin American plays as dramaturgical spaces where multiple aesthetic and socio-political contexts converge. My intention is to problematize the customary reading of violence within Latin American theatre as an instrument of political denunciation. I aim to show instead how in the sixties, violent dramaturgic forms responded to a wider set of preoccupations that included the development of national theatrical scenes, the role of the historical subject, questions about philosophical and historical understanding, and the persistent concern about the relationship between Latin American theatre and the European theatrical avant-garde.

The primary tendency that has governed the criticism of Latin American theatre is the assumption that form is a discrete category that establishes a direct relationship with ideology. This is significant because the two theoretical precepts this assumption implies. Firstly, that twentieth-century Latin American theatre is an ideological vehicle that openly protests a
particular sociopolitical context,¹ and secondly, the fact that politics in theatre have been reduced to a limited understanding of ideology.²

The interpretation of Latin American theatre as an ideological vehicle is deeply rooted in the understanding of theatre as a colonial imposition. Major critical works have attempted to trace the development of theatrical practice in the Latin American continent from the 1500s to the present, and although some astutely argue for the presence of ritual and sacrificial spectacles in Amerindian cultures (Taylor 2008) and the way these spectacles created patterns of transculturation and instances of performative syncretism (Versényi), there is uncontested consent that European drama was introduced to Latin America as a colonizing and evangelizing instrument. The perception of the dramatic form as a foreign aesthetic value used to put forth precise social and political ideas permeates twentieth-century Latin American criticism.

Consequently, numerous Latin American theatre anthologies are guided by the tendency to regard Latin American theatrical practices through a fixed lens of European aesthetic categorizations. The negative consequence of this critical tendency is that it presupposes an unmediated appropriation of European forms to the Latin American context. From this perspective, the Latin American theatre of the sixties merely applies European dramatic moulds to a local reality with the intention of protest. Such is the latent critical view expressed in *Dramatists in Revolt* by Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard:

> While contemporary drama in Latin America is perhaps best characterized by its diversity—in type and in theme— the playwrights who have created this drama are united by a spirit of revolution, both in terms of aesthetics and often sociopolitical values as well. Out of

¹ For detailed analyses of Latin American theatre as political protest, see Lyday and Woodyard, Gutiérrez, Arlt et al., and Adler and Woodyard.

² Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* is exemplary in conceptualizing politics from an exclusively ideological perspective.
this revolutionary spirit has come a new order of message plays, incorporating such major European trends as Existentialism, the theatre of the absurd, and the theatre of cruelty and ritual. (xiii)

Lyday and Woodyard argue that Latin American playwrights incorporate European trends to create “message plays,” thus relegating the complex creative process of theatrical production to merely an ideological act. Moreover, their argument is oblivious of the European context in which Existentialism, the theatre of the absurd, and the theatre of cruelty emerged and developed. The authors replace the European context with a Latin American one in which they posit revolution as the self-evident ideological stance of all Latin American theatre practitioners. Lyday and Woodyard’s argumentation is expressive of the principal critical perspective through which the Latin American theatre of the sixties has been primarily analyzed. The terminology widely utilized by numerous critics, such as liberation theatre, theatre of revolt, and theatre of the oppressed, proves this critical tendency. Furthermore, contemporary analyses perpetuate this interpretative trend, which can be seen in studies such as Katherine Ford’s Politics and Violence in Cuban and Argentine Theatre. In this book, the violence in Cuban theatre in the sixties becomes a means to uncover the spectacle of real political violence taking place offstage, in order to empower their audience to engage with their social and political context. In Ford’s own words, violence was utilized as an instrument of protest intended “to bring about the utopian desires characteristic of the period” (2).

This generalized practice of reading that attributes an explicit and one-dimensional political agenda to Latin America’s twentieth-century theatrical production is a tendency that

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3 Liberation theatre is a term introduced by Adam Versényi in his ambitious book Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortés to the 1980s to speak of the post-1950s Latin American theatre; theatre of revolt is Lyday and Woodyard’s fundamental concept in Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theatre; and theatre of the oppressed is Augusto Boal’s vastly influential theory introduced in the book that takes the same name.
begs to be rigorously revised. This study responds to the necessity of redefining violence and its political correlation within the Latin American theatre of the sixties. The sixties were an important decade of dramaturgical and theatrical development in which a diverse group of Latin American writers produced a series of dramatic works with similar aesthetic characteristics. This dissertation focuses on four of the most prominent figures of this decade: José Triana, Virgilio Piñera, Griselda Gambaro, and Jorge Díaz. These writers were aware of European formal experimentations and were similarly informed by postwar European philosophy. Their knowledge and aesthetic proximity to the European theatrical environment became channels of thought and conceptualization through which they approached and participated within the modernizing and developing dramaturgical and theatrical scenes of their countries. Triana and Piñera wrote under the period of ideological intransigence of the early Cuban revolution, which considered the innovative and avant-gardist character of their works as contrary to the revolution’s cultural and political interests. Gambaro wrote during restless years of increasing violence marked by the emergence and fall of growingly radical military governments, and Jorge Díaz wrote during conflicted times of social transition and theatrical institutionalization in Chile.

The turbulent political and historical moments in which these writers lived and developed their writing explain why criticism has tended to regard their oeuvre as defined instances of political protest. In *Theatre of Crisis*, Diana Taylor offers a more nuanced and perceptive view, which opens new possibilities of interpretation by discussing Latin American theatre in the sixties as an instance of crisis:

*Within Latin America, the widespread manifestations of a theatre of crisis in the 1960s resulted from the rupture precipitated by the rejection of a theatre of oppression which had not yet been replaced by a fully formulated “theatre of the oppressed.” The theatre of*
crisis proposes more questions than answers; it bursts with vitality, with a sense of urgency and aggression that refuses to be sublimated in theatrically ‘safe’ or cathartic ways; it scrutinizes both the violent societies that gave it rise and its own violence, its own role in highly theatricalized societies. The theatre of crisis mirrors the effects of socio-political crisis –the objective, systematic rifts in combination with the subjective experience of decomposition– without yet evolving beyond crisis toward reconstruction.

(7)

Taylor posits the theatre of the sixties, which she terms “theatre of crisis,” essentially as a period of transition in the history of Latin America theatre. It constitutes a period of urgent and violent creations that riddle the audience with questions and the inability to synthesize an integral and coherent view. Simply put, “it proposes more questions than answers.” Taylor’s argumentation rightly describes the dramatic production of this decade as a vigorous moment of plural questioning that counters the notion of the theatre of the sixties as ideologically univocal. This particular insight evidences that Latin American theatre in the sixties calls for sophisticated reading practices that comprehensively account for the instability, ambiguity, and violence that so poignantly characterise it.

The central contention of this study is that the Latin American theatre of the sixties formally and structurally displays a specific configuration of violence that develops radical thinking processes. More specifically, these plays’ formal encoding of violence constitutes means to examine and intersect multiple –local and foreign– aesthetic, socio-political, and historical concerns. From this perspective, Triana, Piñera, Gambaro, and Díaz’s plays can be regarded as spaces of interrelating domains that do not necessarily follow the unidirectional prescription of European formal origin and Latin American socio-political application. In other
words, this allows their plays to escape a limited sociopolitical reading that posits the theatre of
the absurd and theatre of cruelty as empty models that are filled with Latin American social,
historical, and political realities with the intention of protest.

This dissertation is informed by studies that map sophisticated readings of the complex
relationship between Latin American literature and Europe. Concepts like transculturation and
heterogeneity have redefined the understanding of Latin American literature as a space of
dialogue and interaction that actively rethinks and transforms its aesthetic dimension and
meanings in relation to European culture and European literary production. Alberto Moreiras’s
two landmark critical works are an important voice in this debate: Tercer espacio: literatura y
duelo en America Latina (Third Space: Literature and Mourning in Latin America) (1999) and
former conceptualizes Latin American literature as a third space through which we can
productively understand the violent configuration of the theatre of the sixties as a complex
system of relating domains. Moreiras theorizes the need for a third space that critically deals

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4 The term transculturation, coined by the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz in 1940, entered Latin
American discourse through Ángel Rama’s seminal study Transculturación narrativa en América Latina
(Narrative Transculturation in Latin America) (1982) and was further developed by Mary Louise Pratt in
Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992). Both studies, among many others and in
conflation with the advancement of the field of postcolonial studies, have opened the ground to new
theoretical approaches that incorporate the concepts of hybridity, mestizaje, contact zone, and relation,
among others, to investigate and further theorize Latin American literature. See also Avelar (1999) and
Sobrevilla.

5 It is important to note that Moreira’s theory follows Homi Bhabha’s theorization of a third space of
enunciation that articulates cultural difference. In The Location of Culture, Bhabha explores this third
space of enunciation as an “inbetween space” where culture has an unstable and ambivalent quality
subjected to changing and developing meanings. Bhabha foregrounds difference and hybridity to disavow
the notion of cultural hierarchy and particularly that of Eurocentrism. He seeks to problematize the power
of theoretical knowledge to limit and reduce the Other to a metaphor of difference or “closed circle of
interpretation” (45-6). Bhabha’s theory develops from the philosophical tradition of Hegelian dialectics
in which the tension between two contrary arguments –thesis and antithesis– is resolved by means of a
synthesis. Bhabha’s Third Space synthesizes the opposition between the Western sign and the Other to
intentionally “elude the politics of polarity” (56).
with the intrinsic Eurocentrism of Latin American literature. Moreiras explains that in Latin American literature Eurocentrism manifests through either a concrete sign of historicity, which privileges a marked proximity to Eurocentric modernity, or through an alien sign of historicity that constitutes an intended rupture and rejection against the European logos. Moreiras posits that this dichotomy has been historically stressed by a tradition of Latin American criticism that tends to praise or condemn writers for their understanding of European thought or to ignore them because of their lack of commitment with Latin American social realities (4-6). Moreiras thus argues for the need of a third space between European hegemony and subaltern periphery that rejects both the dominance of the metropolitan text and the essentialist quest for Latin American identity.

For Moreiras, this third space is necessarily a space of critical thinking that must integrate and connect multiple genealogies, perspectives, and frames of interpretation. His argumentation enables a more comprehensive view toward the theorization of Latin American literature. He explains:

Desde este punto de vista no se trata ya de entender a Borges o a Lezama, por ejemplo, desde el campo eurocéntrico de deconstrucción, sino más bien de sentar la posibilidad de articular sus obras en alianzas pluritópicas con otras fuentes de pensamiento, que permitan la asociación intertextual de proyectos vinculados por un deseo crítico común,

6 Silviano Santiago’s theorization of Latin American discourse based on the concept of *o entre-lugar* (in-betweenness) must also be stressed in relation to Moreiras’s theory. In his 1978 seminal essay “O entre-lugar do discurso latinoamericano” (translated and published in *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture* as “Latin American Discourse: The Space In-Between”), Santiago argues that Latin American discourse is an interstitial space in which the Latin American writer carries out an arduous labour of “resignifying” previous and foreign signs. The purpose is never to create a copy of the original, but rather an interpretation marked by difference and transgression. Santiago specifies that the Latin American writer’s task is one “of global translation, a pastiche, a parody or a digression rather than a literal translation” (2001 34).
si bien desde posiciones geoculturales claramente delimitadas, desde su lugar histórico de enunciación y empezando por el idioma que usan, como diversas, y por lo tanto abiertas a diversas explicitaciones políticas y genealógicas. Con ello parece liquidarse el problema de la jerarquización de voces… a favor de una posibilidad de lectura múltiple que garantiza también que la fuerza estética y crítica de los textos bajo estudio pueda trascender al tiempo que asumir localismo, y quede así abierta a una historicidad más amplia de la que comúnmente se le concede.

[From this point of view, it is no longer about understanding Borges and Lezama, for instance, from the Eurocentric field of deconstruction, but rather about the possibility of articulating their works in pluritopical alliances with other sources of thought that enable the intertextual association of projects linked by a common critical desire. Although their works spring from clearly articulated geocultural positions, historical places of enunciation, and principally in their own language, they are also diverse and therefore open to being politically and genealogically explicit. In this way, the problem of the hierarchization of voices seems to be settled… in favour of the possibility of a multiple reading which ensures that the aesthetic and critical force of the studied texts can simultaneously transcend and assume localism, and thus remain open to a wider historicity that the commonly conceded one.] (7) 

Crucial in Moreiras’s conceptualization is an open and inclusive practice of reading through which traditional dichotomies –European and Latin American, translation and identity, metropolis and subaltern– become intersecting junctures of critical thinking. These junctures reveal the value of specific Latin American texts within and beyond their linguistic, historical, and socio-political specificities. In this study, my purpose is to develop this type of analysis. I

\footnote{7 In this dissertation, all translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.}
seek to examine the multiple tendencies that inform and compose the Latin American theatre of the sixties to show how particular plays simultaneously engage with their social and historical surroundings while incorporating dissimilar and apparently foreign contexts. My intention is to propose new readings and interpretations that reveal the multiple and interstitial quality of the theatre of the sixties.

A case in point to illustrate this type of analysis is Gambaro’s *El Campo* (*The Camp*) (1967). My reading focuses on the play’s interaction of multiple experiences of crisis informed by European postwar philosophy and the Argentine socio-political setting. Through a discussion of some of Theodor Adorno’s reflections on the role and relevance of art after the Holocaust, I examine how Gambaro’s dramaturgical techniques develop a sense of personal threat pertinent to the Argentine situation of the sixties. I posit that Gambaro’s use of avant-gardist elements do not constitute an exercise of foreign appropriation as is often claimed, but rather a sophisticated conceptualization of the nation’s unstable environment. From this perspective, Gambaro formally juxtaposes the European and Argentine crises through a dramaturgical exploration of the shattering effects of violence.

The central concept that guides this dissertation is the notion of violence, which is developed both as a concrete and paradigmatic concept. I posit that violence constitutes the governing and unifying element through which the works of Triana, Piñera, Gambaro, and Díaz can be productively examined as interstitial spaces whose innovative dramatic techniques perform critical thought. On the formal level of dramaturgical structure and configuration, violence primarily centres on the notions of game and role-playing. The structure of Triana’s *La noche de los asesinos* (*The Night of the Assassins*) (1965) and Piñera’s *Dos viejos pánicos* (*Two Nightmares*)...

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8 I focus particularly on Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life and Metaphysics: Concept and Problems.
Old Panics) (1968) is determined by the form of game. La noche de los asesinos is a play about the vertiginous game of three siblings who persistently enact the murdering of their parents and Dos viejos pánicos is about two aged characters who imagine and rehearse their own death in order to overcome their unbearable terror. In both cases, the game advances the dramatic action in such a way that it determines the play’s structure: both plays begin with the characters’ announcement that the game is about to begin and conclude with the culmination and promise of future enactments of the game.

Nevertheless, despite the violent nature of the characters’ games, the true significance of violence lies within the personal effects that the intermittent acts of role-playing inflict upon the characters. In La noche de los asesinos, the siblings’ persistent imaginings of murder lead them to assume multiple and varied personalities that destabilize their identities and transform them into unfixed and mutable selves. Similarly, in Dos viejos pánicos, the old couple’s cruel game guides them into a frantic state of imagined self-annihilation that threatens their ontological boundaries. As a result, in both plays, the characters’ violent and compulsive games transform their actions into inconsequential acts of performance and their existence into meaningless simulacrum. Triana and Piñera’s dramatic characters are thus prompted to confront the limits of their own consciousness and experience the collapse of their own subjectivity.

Gambaro’s Las paredes (The Walls) (1963) and El campo also explore role-playing’s violent dimension, but in a different mode, one that displays game as a form of tyranny and power. In Las paredes, a young man—simply named Young Man— is kept isolated in a shrinking room without precise knowledge about the motives for his seclusion. The Doorman and Functionary (who play the role of captors) gradually unsettle the Young Man’s objective sense of certainty through conniving techniques of manipulation that instil doubt and confusion into his
frail mind. The Young Man eventually loses his ability to judge others based on his own senses and perception, and is left shattered and disoriented, unable to escape his imminent death. In *El campo*, this exertion of despotic power in guise of harmless charades is developed to a greater extent. In this play, Franco, the director of a concentration camp, pretends to run an innocuous establishment by masquerading the true identity of the place through the devious strategy of performance. Franco forces both prisoners and guards to behave as if they were free and independent individuals. Emma, a deeply distraught prisoner, displays the impairing effects of forced performance through her disturbing impersonation of a diva, when in reality her torn, gray clothing, baldness, tattooed arm, and emaciated body evidence her terrible condition as a suffering prisoner. She epitomizes the contradiction between the appearance of normalcy and the crude reality of the concentration camp. As shattered beings with no agency or defined sense of individuality, the characters of *El campo* portray the damaging effects of violence disguised as a game of performance. This shows that in both of Gambaro’s plays, role-playing transcends the formal and structural function of shaping and advancing the dramatic action to determine the dramatic characters’ psychological and ontological dimension.

The violence of performance in Triana, Piñera, and Gambaro’s dramatic worlds brings about serious ontological effects that point to a different understanding of politics that surpasses the univocal ideological meanings traditionally attributed to it in Latin American criticism. As Moreiras rightly points out, Latin American criticism privileges social and political engagement in its quest to define Latin American identity. Following Moreiras, the present study proposes a different approach to the question of political relevance that centres on formal violence as the concrete means through which a wider understanding of politics can be formulated. In *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Rancière persuasively argues that the political dimension of art is
not contained in the explicit messages it may express, but rather that art “is political because of
the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time
that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space” (23). The
dramatic spaces of the theatre of the sixties are violent spaces of performance that produce torn
and fragmented beings that lack a stable sense of agency and coherent notion of self. The
ontological experience of these vulnerable beings elicits important questions about the formation
of the subject and the necessary structures –ethical, social, emotional, and psychological– that
maintain this subjectivity. These plays therefore illuminate Rancière’s conceptualization of
“aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and
induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (2004 9). From this viewpoint, my analysis seeks to
posit the radical structures of violence in Triana, Piñera, Gambaro, and Díaz’s dramatic works as
channels of political inquiry. I argue that these playwrights create dramatic spaces that posit
subjectivity –and its threatened condition– as suitable grounds for examining the social and
political contexts from which the different plays emerge. Therefore, in this dissertation it is my
objective to develop a broader interpretative frame that examines how the radical aesthetic
configuration of these plays speaks of the historical circumstances that surround them.

In order to develop this analysis, I recall Taylor’s contention that “The theatre of crisis
mirrors the effects of socio-political crisis” (7). Triana, Piñera, and Gambaro’s plays show the
impairing effects of violence in insightful modes that shed light on the Cuban and Argentine
socio-political contexts of the sixties. In the case of Triana and Piñera, I explore how the
characters’ ontological vulnerability in La noche de los asesinos and Dos viejos pánicos
illuminates the violent effects of revolution. The 1959 Cuban revolution replaced old social and
political structures with a new order and worldview that forced the Cuban subject to redefine his
or herself in relation to the new regime. I argue that the revolution’s personal and ontological demands subdue the historical subject to a similar experience of vulnerability and disorientation seen in Triana and Piñera’s violent dramatic worlds. My analysis further examines the idea of revolution as a precarious instance of ambivalent experience that inherently obscures clear understanding. I thus posit that revolution precludes the possibility of integral comprehension because of its contingent and historically complex structure.

My study further addresses this argument that history is an inscrutable process in relation to Gambaro’s plays. I discuss Las paredes and El campo as two important dramaturgical instances in the Argentine theatrical scene that illuminate the intrinsic difficulties contained in the process and exercise of grasping history. Gambaro’s characters are subjected to power strategies which instils an undeniable sense of confusion in them and renders doubt as their determinate state of being. For this reason, the Young Man, in Las paredes, and the camp’s prisoners, in El campo, systematically fail to understand the imminent dangers that surround them. Moreover, they fail to understand the way in which these dangers persistently hinder their personal sense of agency and individuality. From this perspective, I thus propose that Gambaro’s plays dramatize epistemological confusion as an intrinsic quality of crisis. The importance of this claim lies in its relation to the Argentine social environment of the fifties and sixties. During this period, early signs of violence started to enter the social spectrum determined by the political instability and militarization of the country. My discussion shows how Gambaro’s plays dramatize the complex character of history as an inscrutable dimension that surpasses the subject’s cognitive abilities. Furthermore, I comment how her plays shed light on the serious consequences of political violence, which imply loss at the very core of human experience.
An important element of the historical complexities of revolution is that, in its mutable and indeterminate configuration, it annuls the certainty of utter chaos or regeneration. In other words, its intrinsic complexity precludes the possibility of foreseeing the catastrophic or reconciliatory progress of history. In his persuasive book *The Catastrophe of Modernity: Tragedy and the Nation in Latin American Literature*, Patrick Dove conceptualizes the nation-building process in Latin America through the theoretical framework of tragedy. Dove develops his argument based on a Hegelian understanding of tragedy. He explains how an initial clash between the antithetical domains of family and social order is eventually resolved in the symbolic reconciliation of aesthetic production. From this theoretical standpoint, he uses the tragic form “as essentially a political narrative” that describes the course of Latin American history as a moment of destruction and annihilation followed by the promise of a new beginning. The initial stage of destruction sets the basis for the reordering of the modern nation-state, “in which modernity equals the advance of the spirit of political and cultural autonomy and social justice” (11). This dissertation focuses on the violent and contingent environment of crisis in

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9 Significantly based on Sophocle’s *Antigone*, G.W.F. Hegel developed a theory of tragedy in accordance with the dialectics of the spirit. Hegel argues that tragedy impersonates this dialectic process through the self-division and self-reconciliation of the ethical substance in which two ethical powers—for instance, Antigone representing the female realm of family and Creon the male realm of social order—oppose and collide. The two forces are equally justified in their ethical claim, but the individual claim of these powers is contrary to the universal consciousness, which leads to their destruction for the reconciliation, and purification, of the true ethical substance. Hegel develops this theory primarily in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1806).

10 Dove further interprets Latin American modernity through contemporary readings of tragedy—Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe— that incorporate the idea of trace and residue. He puts forth a conceptualization of history as a sequence of catastrophic nodes that display progress while simultaneously revealing the loss and violence—or trace of what has been lost in the process of reconciliation—through which said progress has been achieved (17). He thus states that Latin American literature “laments and struggles to remember violence and loss that accompany the founding of the modern nation-state” (19-20).
which the horizon of order and stability is not yet be discerned. Through a series of close readings, I discuss how Latin American theatre in the sixties dramatizes and explores the emotional and psychological burden of conflicted historical periods. Triana and Piñera’s ontologically broken characters and Gambaro’s epistemologically confused characters indicate the difficulty of forming a coherent historical perspective in the midst of social and political chaos.

The proposition that the decade of the sixties constituted a period of crisis and revolution and limited historical perspective is linked to the processes of modernization and institutionalization that the different national theatrical scenes experienced. The period in which the playwrights wrote their earliest plays was a transitional one characterized by a spirit of experimentation that often led to misreadings and misperceptions of their work. I investigate the four playwrights’ significance within their specific national contexts and the ways in which their plays both detracted from and advanced the development of these contexts. I emphasise Triana and Piñera’s ambiguous relation with the Cuban revolution. Both writers initially supported the revolution through their allegiance and membership to the UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba), but eventually moved away as their literary and aesthetic interests clashed with the limited views of revolutionary ideology. I examine how, despite Triana and Piñera’s cultural ostracism, given that La noche de los asesinos was staged and soon discredited and Dos viejos pánicos was never staged during Piñera’s lifetime, they remain important figures in the Cuban dramatic tradition that shaped the country’s theatrical development. In Gambaro’s case, I focus on the critical lens that disparaged Las paredes and El campo for their markedly European and avant-gardist aesthetics. I explain how Gambaro’s early dramaturgy was not opposed to the predominant realist trend, but was rather an integral part of the national project of theatrical
modernization. My analysis stresses that she remained acutely aware of her contemporary social and political context precisely through her formal innovations and experimentations with dramaturgical practice and expression.

The third theatrical context I investigate is Chilean theatre. I focus on Jorge Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes* (*The Toothbrush*) (1961). In this play, a middle-aged couple engages in a fast-paced game of frantic interaction in which they quote and incorporate external voices and sources that saturate the dialogue and determine the nature of their relationship. These sources, such as magazines, radio announcements, journals, popular music, and a varied range of mass media elements, turn the dramatic dialogue into an exuberant space of social plurality. Within this space, the characters’ personal voices and sense of individuality is constantly menaced and overwhelmed. In my analysis, I describe how the violence inherent in the couple’s game constitutes a quest for heightened experience through which the characters explore the individual limits of being and seek the possibility of experiencing otherness and plurality. I maintain that this interest of moving towards a collective horizon characterizes Díaz’s fundamental preoccupations as a theatre maker. Díaz channelled his theatrical writing and practice towards the creation of a socially relevant theatre that would surpass the scope of the Chilean middle class and reach all social strata. It is well documented that his central concerns were the social and political role of theatre and theatre practitioners in Chilean society. In short, the analysis of the Cuban, Argentine, and Chilean theatrical scenes in this dissertation emphasises the playwrights’ quest for innovative theatrical practices and forms as means to confront and conceptualize their own social and historical contexts.

The conceptual backbone of this dissertation is that violence is the formal configuration that synthesizes the playwright’s understanding of their surroundings. Moreover, it is the
principal axis through which the plays are analyzed and linked. In order to account for the playwrights’ specific cultural and social contexts, this study’s three chapters centre on specific countries. Chapter 1 focuses on Cuba. It posits revolution as the form that characterizes the violent spaces of performance and randomized action of Triana’s *La noche de los asesinos* and Piñera’s *Dos viejos pánicos*. Through Franz Fanon’s theorization of violence, I argue that these texts dramatize the experience of the historical subject within the violent process of revolution. This approach seeks to tackle important questions about the subject’s agency, transcendence, fear, and vulnerability. Furthermore, I explore how the contingent space of revolution compels the subject to redefine him or herself in relation to the unstable and changeable social and political environment. I discuss this phenomenon centring on the subject’s dynamic process of self-definition and narration. This analysis seeks to trace points of convergence between the different philosophic and historical contexts that informed Triana and Piñera. I propose that *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos*, through the similar conceptualization of the subject as a dynamic creative process, constitute complex spaces of representation that juxtapose and overlap Existentialist thought with particularities of the Cuban revolution. In this chapter, I thus show how these two plays reflect on the question of being human by dramatizing and reflecting on the personal and historical dimension of experiencing the revolution.

Chapter 2 develops through a close reading of Gambaro’s *Las paredes* and *El campo*. It considers these two plays as important instances of crisis whose terrifying dramatic worlds illuminate the growing unrest of Argentina in the sixties. Furthermore, it investigates how these plays, by conceptualizing crisis, escaped the understanding of their contemporary audience. The analysis focuses on dictated role-playing and determined spaces of performance as mischievous practices of power that circumscribe the subject within a mental space of doubt and confusion.
Based on Ricardo Piglia’s theory of conspiracy and Adorno’s insights on paranoia, I examine the way the violent aesthetic composition of Gambaro’s plays formally intersect the metaphysical damage of the Holocaust and European avant-gardist forms with the growing violence of Argentina. My desire is to foreground her dramatic characters’ epistemologically confused condition as a historical category that also describes the condition of her contemporary audience. My analysis is therefore attentive to the relevance of Gambaro in the Argentine developing theatrical context, but more generally, it puts forth important questions about perception and the reception of theatre in defined moments of historical crisis.

Chapter 3 posits that the plural dramatic space of Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes* represents aesthetic innovation and theatrical development in the Chilean context. I use Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia as a theoretical framework to examine the play’s dramatic dialogue as an exuberant social environment. I pay particular attention to the mode in which this social space of hyperbole contributes to the ontological instability of the characters and systematically threatens their personal voice and individuality. This chapter discusses the effects of the plural space of interaction as a willed condition through which the characters achieve a heightened sense of reality. My contention is that the characters’ desire to merge with the dramatic dialogue’s social and stimulating space constitutes a desire to endlessly imagine and enact the fantasy of vicarious existence. I investigate how their game constitutes a paradigmatic model of innovation that speaks to Díaz’s arduous struggle to push theatre making toward a more inclusive social and political practice. In this chapter, *El cepillo de dientes* is therefore conceptualized as an instance of critical questioning of the Chilean theatrical scene in the early sixties.
My dissertation concludes with an epilogue that seeks to synthesize the understanding of the Latin American theatre of the sixties as period of dramaturgic and theatrical innovation where multiple aesthetic and contextual elements intersect. I aim to further emphasize the point that certain plays of this period produce intricate structures of radical violence that seriously reflect on their social and theatrical environments. This is achieved through a close reading of Álvaro Cepeda Samudio’s novel *La casa grande* (*The Big House*) (1962). I have chosen to conclude a study about theatre by analysing a novel because Cepeda Samudios’s text displays an aesthetic configuration of violence similar to Triana’s, Piñera’s, Gambaro’s, and Díaz’s plays. *La casa grande* juxtaposes history and myth in a way that stresses ontological and epistemological confusion as symptomatic effects of historical perception. Furthermore, this novel has historically occupied an important place in the modernization of the Colombian novel and Colombian theatre. In 1966, *La casa grande* was adapted as the opening play of the Casa de la Cultura. The landmark event marked the “acceso a la modernidad del teatro colombiano” (“access to modernity in Colombian theatre”) (Cajamarca Castro 86) through the adaptation of one of Colombia’s first modern novels. My discussion of *La casa grande* ultimately seeks to emphasize that violence signifies both a concrete formal element and a paradigmatic representation of critical thought. Moreover, it seeks to foreground the importance of the studied plays in their ability to conceptualize and aestheticize critical times of change—social, political, cultural, and aesthetic—and their profound subjective effects. Through this lens, this study hopes to offer new channels of interpretation that prompt us to seriously and conscientiously revise the theatre of the sixties simply as aloof avant-gardist theatre or theatre of protest. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding and theorization of Latin American theatre.
Chapter 1
José Triana and Virgilio Piñera:
The Question of Being in the Revolution

I am interested above all else in man, man as he shows himself, man as he is produced every day (...) I look at man in his critical attitudes, in a key position, in the moment of possible transformations and possible cataclysms.

José Triana

“The theatre in Cuba since 1959 is a product of the Revolution” (Woodyard 1983 57).

These words, with which George F. Woodyard begins his article on Abelardo Estorino’s theatre, assertively situate the revolution as the imminent framework through which all Cuban cultural production after 1959 is categorized, approached, and analyzed. The dramaturgical production of José Triana and Virgilio Piñera is no exception. This chapter focuses on Triana’s La noche de los asesinos (1965) and Piñera’s Dos viejos pánicos (1968) in an attempt to look at the revolution not only as the historical and political context of these plays, but also, and most importantly, as their form. The form of revolution implies violence and a shattering of structures and paradigms that significantly relate to the shifting and unstable dramatic spaces of Triana and Piñera’s plays. I argue that these violent spaces create fragmented and disoriented beings through which we can explore the experience of the historical subject within the violent process of the revolution. In La noche de los asesinos this exploration centres on the question of subjectivity, considering the subject’s ability to comprehend the complex machinations of history and to productively act within this contingent space. In Dos viejos pánicos the exploration focuses on fear as the

\[1\] Quoted by Frank N. Dauster in “The Game of Chance: The Theatre of José Triana.”
quintessential state of vulnerability that characterizes the experiential crisis of the historical subject immersed in the vortex of revolution. Furthermore, this chapter traces points of convergence between Existentialism and the socio-political context of revolutionary Cuba in order to show how the plays reveal important questions about ontological fulfilment intrinsic to the regime’s ideological discourse. I hope to persuasively show that Triana and Piñera create complex spaces of representation that intersect and overlap the ontological concerns of these multiple and varying contexts, ultimately examining the vast question of being human by imagining and dramatizing the experience of being in the revolution.

**Reading *La noche de los asesinos***

*La noche de los asesinos* premiered in November 4, 1966 during the Sixth Havana Festival of Latin American Theatre. The play was quick to receive the critical attention that turned it into one of the most discussed and performed Latin American plays. However, this critical attention maintained divergent viewpoints that granted it an ambiguous position in the Cuban dramaturgical scene. Critics read and interpreted the play predominantly through a political lens that fixed the play within ideological boundaries. At one side of the spectrum, critics postulated the play as an allegory of the times that preceded the revolution and regarded the piece as a hostile one against the socio-political situation under the Batista regime. Frank N. Dauster voices this viewpoint by positing that Triana is “profoundly critical of the stagnancy that led to the need for revolt, of the blind religiosity, political corruption, and family decay that

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2 The performance was done by Teatro Estudio under the direction of Vicente Revuelta and it was staged at the Hubert de Blanck Hall. It won the Casa de las Américas award, the highest recognition granted to a theatrical production in Cuba.

3 See Dauster and Julio Miranda.
prevailed” (184). Triana himself supported this interpretation by stating that he began to write the play in the mid-fifties and that through his work he sought means to reaffirm the revolution (qtd. in Fernández Fernández 44). Moreover, the stage direction that opens the play: “Época: Cualquiera de los años 50” (“Time: Any year in the 50s”), has traditionally been regarded as an important textual detail that hints at the play’s allegiance to the Cuban revolution. Nonetheless, this critical approach did not prevail during Triana’s dramaturgical career. On the contrary, Triana was relegated to a position of intellectual marginalization that eventually culminated with his exile to France in 1980.

The tendency to regard the play as a counterrevolutionary text became the official interpretation that prevailed in Cuba during the decades of the sixties and seventies. In her insightful article “La noche de los asesinos: Playscript and Stage Enactment,” Kirsten Nigro posits that the domestic conflict of the play in its cyclic structure could suggest that recent Cuban history is a perpetuation of successive tyrannies in which a dictatorship replaces another “ad infinitum” (47). Although Nigro merely states this approach as a possible reading to which she does not subscribe, such lines of argumentation constitute the core of important critical works that regarded Triana as an antirevolutionary playwright. For instance, Román V. de la Campa in José Triana: ritualización de la sociedad cubana examines the local reception of La noche de los asesinos and contends that Triana failed to capture the revolutionary spirit of the new Cuban society. Similarly, other critics saw in Triana’s play a poignant critique against the revolution’s institutionalizing process and relegated it to the condemned space of dissidence.4 One of the theoretical backbones common to these critiques functioned on an ideological level; the gist of postulating history as a cyclic process fundamentally refuted the revolutionary principle of history as a linear development that could and should be modified by the human being. There is

4 See, for example, Matías Montes Huidobro (1973).
no question that from this perspective _La noche de los asesinos_ contradicted fundamental axioms of revolutionary ideology.

Outside Cuba and beyond ideologically polarized readings, Triana’s play was widely acclaimed in the European continent. The play’s first performance abroad took place in England in 1968; the Royal Shakespeare Company staged the play under the name of _The Criminals_, initiating its tremendous international success. The play was seen as a Latin American version of the theatre of the absurd. Critics saw in its aesthetic composition avant-gardist traits that formally and philosophically displayed great similarity with the theatrical experimentations of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet. This critical appreciation had a strong resonance in Latin American criticism, which began to see Triana as part of a broader theatrical movement on the Latin America stage. In his 1969 pioneer article “The Theatre of the Absurd in Spanish America,” Woodyard posits that since the mid-fifties the Spanish American theatrical scene saw a renewed vitality through plays that utilized sophisticated forms, avant-gardist devices, and complex dramatic structures which transcended national boundaries. Additionally, he sustains, these innovative forms escaped the melodramatic and sensationalistic tone of previous plays and worked towards elucidating the human condition and becoming “significant commentaries on a universal scale” (183). Although in this article Woodyard develops a critical viewpoint that differs from his approach in later works, this text is significant because it expresses a universal reading of Triana’s play. _La noche de los asesinos_ was regarded as a theatrical piece that transcended its local bearings and functioned on the universal thematic horizon of human concerns.

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5 Revuelta, the director, and the group of actors were invited by the Théâtre des Nations to perform in Paris and later in Avignon. The play was also performed at the Biennale di Venezia and toured around eight Italian cities. Eventually, the play was translated into twenty-one languages and spread from Africa to the Middle East (Meyran 25).
In her outstanding book *The Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America*, Diana Taylor offers a coherent framework through which the different critical tendencies that circumscribe *La noche de los asesinos* can be conceptualized. Taylor posits that much of the criticism written about Latin American theatre has contributed to diminish its perception. She develops her argument through the identification of two specific critical perspectives. The first critical perspective, she explains, is primarily led by American and European commentators who during the decades of the sixties and seventies judged Latin American plays exclusively as texts and “tended to decontextualize the drama, focusing on universal themes and recognizable models and traditions” (14). This critical approach that regards texts in isolation and according to universal parameters, she argues, actually continues to judge these texts as products of an underdeveloped world (16). The second critical perspective considers theatre only as part of a political process in which theatre is regarded as a political weapon and instrument of liberation. To illustrate this view, Taylor discusses Augusto Boal’s well-known theory “The theatre of the oppressed.” She discusses it as an important and influential critical perspective that simplifies the theatrical phenomenon to an element of social change (17-8).

The appreciation of *La noche de los asesinos* as a Latin American version of the theatre of the absurd represents the first critical perspective Taylor posits. The focus on aesthetic devices in relation to European traditions reduces the plays to texts concerned with universal themes. Correspondingly, the critical commentaries that valued Triana’s play according to its ideological allegiance represent the second critical perspective in Taylor’s argumentation. These commentaries primarily viewed the play through a political lens that considered its value as an agent of social change for the benefit of the revolution. This latter tendency was not exclusive to Cuba, but also extensively developed across Latin America. A vital example is Woodyard’s
seminal work *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theatre*, edited in collaboration with Leon F. Lyday. Woodyard and Lyday contend that “While contemporary drama in Latin America is perhaps best characterized by its diversity—in type and theme—the playwrights who have created this drama are united by a spirit of revolution” (xiii). The two contrasting critical approaches that Taylor puts forth, which relate to the critical tendencies that discuss *La noche de los asesinos*, can be summarized either the aesthetic universalist viewpoint or the socio-political one. This schematic visualization illustrates how Latin American dramatic criticism has traditionally overemphasized either form or context, failing to produce integral and coherent accounts for many Latin American plays. This problem is particularly relevant to the experimental theatre of the sixties in its tendency to employ sophisticated formal devices and create highly ambiguous worlds that obscure evident political ideology. These characteristic elements facilitate criticism that either focuses on the form’s avant-gardist character or seeks proof of the playwright’s political intention.

In her aforementioned book and various other studies, Taylor has attempted successfully to bridge the gap between these two critical tendencies. Nonetheless, her analysis at times aligns with prior flawed models when arguing that dramatists of this period “took recognizable ‘First World’ models and changed them into vehicles capable of expressing ‘Third World’ realities” (7). More specifically, she argues that Triana “converts First World artistic products into vehicles for the expression of his own specific cultural and historical concerns” (66). It is clear that the categorical distinction between “First World” forms and “Third World” socio-political realities cannot be disregarded or undermined when speaking of Latin American theatre. However, treating form and context (or aesthetic model and socio-political reality) as discrete categories bound to geographical spaces continues to reproduce limited analytical
patterns embedded in past reading practices. In my reading of *La noche de los asesinos*, I would like to posit that the revolution is not only the play’s political context, but also, and most importantly, its *form*. The play has traditionally been read as a “self-contained set of rituals meant at some level to stand in for the outside world” (Gladhart 192), but this assumption that the play’s action symbolically represents an outside referential, obliterates the play itself and its intricate modes of intersecting and encoding reality. As we shall see, the dramatic action of *La noche de los asesinos* constitutes the process of revolution itself. It is not an allegorical representation of the Cuban revolution, but rather a dramaturgical exploration of revolution as change and violence. Revolution understood in this dynamic sense relates to questions about ontology and transcendence that enable us to investigate the experiential and emotional processes of the Cuban subject immersed in the historical process of the revolution.

**Shifting performances and collapsing structures**

In *La noche de los asesinos*, three siblings, Lalo, Cuca, and Beba, perform the assassination of their parents as they repetitively enact a convoluted game. The action takes place in an isolated room that might well be an attic or basement. The indefinite temporality of the play makes it impossible for the spectator to determine whether the murder has truly occurred and the game constitutes a ritualization of the criminal act, or if, on the contrary, the game is a rehearsal for a future murder that has not or will never take place. The play is divided into two acts. In the first act, Lalo, the brother, initiates the game and incites his two sisters to participate. Cuca

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6 The dramatic action echoes the events of *The Libation Bearers* in *The Orestia* in which Electra and Orestes plan to murder their mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge the assassination of their father, Agammenon. In *La noche de los asesinos*, however, the matricidal theme becomes part of the representational frame of action because it is continually enacted or referred to, but never perpetrated, as in Aeschylus’s play. It thus becomes an elusive theme that serves as backdrop for the elaborate scheme of role-playing that develops in Triana’s play.
resists at first, but then slowly starts to get involved in the action giving in to Lalo’s capricious demands. As the game develops, the environment becomes highly ambiguous and reaches its climax when Lalo perpetrates the violent crime against their parents. In the second act, the three siblings continuously exchange roles, acting as the policemen that come to investigate the crime, the district attorney who judges Lalo, various friends of the family, and their own parents at different stages of their life. During these criminal, judicial, social, and domestic sequences of role-playing the siblings’ identities constantly shift creating a complex space of multiple representations that confound the notion of a fixed reality. Bound to this space of representation, there is a constant and significant emotional burden that afflicts and exhausts the characters. The play concludes with Beba’s frightening assertion: “Ahora me toca a mí” (“Now it’s my turn”) (128), which fixates the cyclic character of both game and play.

Halfway through the first act Lalo declares: “Esta casa es mi mundo” (“This house is my world”) (85). The house is concretized onstage within the spatial limits of the room in which Lalo, Cuca, and Beba carry out their game. This house, which is also the room and the game, has an immanent quality within the play; there is no possible outside. Spatially, the dramatic action is confined to the isolated room; temporally, the cyclic structure of the game secludes all notion of past or future; and psychologically, the siblings are bound to the dynamics of the game. The lack of an exterior or transcendent space incorporates a sense of confinement that permeates the dramatic action and the entire theatrical experience. It is crucial to note that this absolute and immanent space that we as spectators perceive has a sophisticated semantic distribution. Triana utilizes stage directions to indicate where the actors should be standing at specific moments during the action. The characters are constantly moving around the stage, but at particular instances in the dramatic action they strategically shift from the back to the front of the stage, or
vice versa, and these spatial displacements reinforce changes in their behaviour. For instance, soon after Cuca finally yields to Lalo’s pressure and decides to partake in the game, there is a stage direction that indicates her advancement towards the forefront where she proceeds to impersonate their mother. These permanent displacements create tensions between the background and the foreground, resulting in a complex dynamic that overlaps the characters’ reality and their game in increasingly complicated modes.

The complex space of representation in La noche de los asesinos ultimately creates a state of utter ambiguity. Early in the first act, when Cuca is still hesitant about participating in the game, Lalo pretends that two of their parents’ vexing friends, Margarita and Pantaleón, have unexpectedly arrived and he blames Cuca for inviting them. Cuca, Triana specifies, is terrified and does not know how to enter the game. She manages, however, to momentarily step into her role and pretend that she has indeed invited the couple. Lalo reproaches Cuca for befriending the unwelcomed couple, but Cuca is unable to resist the emotional charge of the game and soon steps out of her role:

CUCA. (Fuera de juego.) No sigas.

LA LO. Hazlo.

CUCA. Me sacas de quicio.

LA LO. Ten coraje.

CUCA. (Sofocada.) Perdóname, te lo suplico.

………………………………………………

BEBA. (A LA LO.) Déjala un rato.

CUCA. (Sollozando.) No tengo la culpa. Soy así. No puedo cambiar. Ojalá pudiera.

[CUC A. (Outside the game.) Stop.
LALO. Do it.

CUCA. You drive me crazy.

LALO. Be brave.

CUCA. (Suffocated.) Forgive me, I beg you.

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BEBA. (To LALO.) Leave her alone.

CUCA. (Sobbing.) It’s not my fault. This is who I am. I can’t change. I wish I could.

(79)

Cuca’s sudden detachment from the game marks one of the many instances in which the action oscillates between the imaginary characters they impersonate and the siblings’ reality. Although such change is indicated here through a specific stage direction – “Outside the game,” – the tension between game and reality still constitutes an intricate instance of ambiguous possibilities. Cuca’s plea to Lalo to forgive her refers to her incapacity to fully commit to the game, but it could also be interpreted as part of her role in the game in which she apologizes for having invited the unpleasant couple. This situation would imply that Cuca’s emotional breakdown would actually constitute a pretence and her apparent weakness would be part of her acting. Such reading is congruent with the play’s ambivalent dynamics in which words and behaviours increasingly point to different meanings that overlap frames of reference.

The latter premise becomes evident in the first act’s closing line uttered by Beba to Cuca: “La primera parte ha terminado” (“The first part is over”) (100), which echoes Beba’s first line in the play: “La representación ha empezado” (“The representation has begun”) (75). These two statements explicitly refer to the characters’ situation and the game they enact; however, it is also evident that Beba’s words refer to a space beyond the characters’ reality. Her words allude to the
spectator’s theatrical experience and to the dramatic structure of the play: indeed, the whole dramatic representation has just begun when she utters these words, and the first act concludes with her statement. The ambivalent quality that language acquires in the play destabilizes fixed meanings and points to different contexts that obliterate boundaries within and beyond the stage. On the one hand, there is always doubt whether a character is participating in the game and playing a role or whether he or she is simply acting within his or her own level of reality. On the other hand, there is also the question of the characters’ awareness of their role-playing and representation, which at times seems to project and enter the reality of the spectator. It is in this sense that the dramatic action of La noche de los asesinos develops in a generalized state of ambiguity that problematizes a fixed and determinate notion of reality.

In the above-cited fragment, Cuca insists that she cannot help being who she is. Her phrase, better suited for a melodrama, becomes a highly ironic remark within the dramatic context of La noche de los asesinos. The characters’ identity is constantly being mediated by a multitude of representations that weakens their identity and invalidates a fixed notion of selfhood. In reality, what Cuca and her siblings cannot help is embodying a heterogeneous array of plural impersonations. An illuminating fact in this regard is that at given moments within the action the spectator cannot determine whether the spoken words are uttered by one of the siblings referring to his or her own reality, or whether they are uttered by one of the many imaginary identities that participate in the game. Hence, the game develops through uncertain acts of ventriloquism that further undermine the characters’ identity. This leads to a fragmented perception that prevents the spectator from perceiving any of the characters as a whole and integral being and the characters thus constitute “figuras de un museo en ruinas” (“figures of a museum in ruins”) (74), as Triana’s opening stage direction indicates. As ontologically
fragmented beings, like ruins, the characters stand in the threshold between existence and inexistence. Lalo, Cuca, and Beba, subjected to a complex game of constantly overlapping representations, are specters of their own selves: they are bodies inhabited by a myriad of ephemeral others.

Understanding that the play’s three characters are vulnerable and broken beings leads us to question traditional readings of *La noche de los asesinos* that speak of the characters’ overt intentions and consequent actions. For instance, to cite a paradigmatic example, Dauster contends that Lalo’s character represents absolute rebellion,

Cuca, in contrast, defends her parents and accepts their world; her participation is reluctant, while Beba oscillates between the two attitudes, unable to resolve her hatred of the parents’ pedestrian world, their rancor’s and pettiness, and the alternatives offered by Cuca and Lalo: total acceptance or total rebellion (179).

Dauster attributes a fixed position to Lalo and Cuca overlooking the fact that their constant impersonations do not add up to a coherent self that can carry out consequent actions. His skewed view does not take into account that Cuca’s initial remarks about not wanting to join Lalo’s game because of her respect toward their parents, transform in the second act into an eager desire to lead the murderous game. Moreover, Dauster undermines the space of representation in the play in which the constant dynamics of incessant role-playing shift the characters from a state of passivity and acceptance to a state of aggressive rebellion that is by no means exclusive to Beba. On the contrary, all the characters oscillate within the play’s unfixed space of ambiguity.

Nonetheless, Dauster, and many other critics, are right in pointing out that in *La noche de los asesinos* there is a latent desire for rebellion. Lalo expresses this desire early in the play when
he protests against their parents’ over-bearing control and his lack of autonomy within the household. He enthusiastically tells Cuca: “¿No se te ha ocurrido nunca lo que significa que tú puedas pensar, decidir y hacer por tu propia cuenta?” (“Hasn’t it ever occurred to you what it would mean to think, decide, and act on your own behalf?”) (86). Lalo’s comment can indeed be read as part of a generational conflict in which he must challenge and break his parents’ authority to reassure his own autonomy, but the play’s complex configuration begs for a different understanding. We can begin to trace the possible meanings of rebellion in the play by focusing on the following fragment in which Cuca plays the mother, Lalo (intermittently) the father, and Beba struggles playing herself as a young girl:

CUCA. ( . . ) “Únete, no seas boba. Nos divertiremos.” Es inconcebible. Lo estoy viendo y me parece una tomadura de pelo. Vamos, levántate. (La ayuda a pararse. Como la madre.) Recuerda que estás delante de una visita. (Al visitante imaginario.) Son tan malcriados, tan insoportables… (A BEBA. Llevándola hasta la silla donde estaba sentada.) Muñeca mía, compórtate como la niña fina que eres, como una niñita educada…

BEBA. (Como una niña.) Me quiero ir.

CUCA. (Como la madre.) ¿A dónde quieres ir, nenita?

LALO. (Fuera del juego. Violento.) Esto no es así. Esto no sirve.

CUCA. (Como la madre.) No te sulfures, Alberto.

LALO. Me dan deseos de estrangularla.

CUCA. (Como la madre.) Paciencia, hombre.

BEBA. (Llorando.) Tengo miedo.

LALO. ¿Miedo, a qué? ¿Por qué llora?
CUCA. (Como la madre.) Ignórala. Es lo mejor, Alberto.

LALO. (Como el padre. Con gestos torpes.) Algunas veces… (Se golpea la rodilla derecha.) Compréndeme, mujer.

CUCA. (Como la madre.) ¿Cómo no voy a comprenderte? (Suspira.) Ay, Alberto, tú también eres un niño. ¡Si lo sabré yo, Angelita!

BEBA. (Como una furia. En pie.) ¡Basta!... Quisiera reventar. Quisiera volar. No soporto este encierro. Me ahogo. Voy a morir y detesto sentirme aplastada, hundida en este cuarto…, ay no puedo más… Por favor, yo les suplico, déjenme.

[CUCAn. (…) “Join us, don’t be a fool. We will have fun.” It’s unthinkable. I see it and it’s like a joke. Come on, stand up. (She helps her stand up. As the mother.) Remember we have guests. (To the imaginary guests.) They are so spoilt, they are unbearable… (To BEBA. Taking her to her own chair.) My sweetie, behave like the refined girl you are, like a polite little girl…

BEBA. (As a girl.) I want to go.

CUCA. (As the mother.) Where do you want to go, sweetie?

LALO. (Outside the game. Violent.) This is not the way. It doesn’t work.

CUCA. (As the mother.) Don’t infuriate yourself, Alberto.

LALO. I feel like I want to strangle her.

CUCA. (As the mother.) Patience, man.

BEBA. (Crying.) I am afraid.

LALO. Afraid of what? Why is she crying?

CUCA. (As the mother.) Ignore her. It’s best, Alberto.
LALO. (As the father. With clumsy gestures.) Sometimes… (He strikes his right knee.)

Understand me, woman.

CUCA. (As the mother.) How could I not understand you? (Sighs.) Oh, Alberto, you are also a child. Wouldn’t I know it, Angelita!

BEBA. (Furiously. Standing up.) Stop it! I would like to burst. I would like to fly. I cannot stand feeling trapped. I’m suffocating. I’m going to die and I hate feeling crushed, sunken in this room… I cannot take it anymore… Please, I beg you, leave me.] (96-7)

In this fragment, Cuca stands as the representational frame. She plays the role of the mother who is in turn acting in front of the imaginary guests to follow the protocols of social decorum. Beba’s nervous attempt to leave the game is thus reduced within Cuca’s frame to a mere childish tantrum easily situated within these codes of social performance. However, Lalo’s outburst against Beba’s behavior introduces tension between Cuca’s attempt to continue the game and Beba’s desire to stop the charade. Lalo wants to violently attack Beba for not participating in the game the way she should, but soon after he resumes his impersonation of the father, he continues his performance with clumsy gestures. The corporeal hesitance between the fluidity of performance and the possibility of withdrawal confounds the space of the game with the characters’ reality. These two become intricately related through a network of ambiguous associations. By the time that Beba furiously cries that she cannot tolerate the suffocating situation anymore and begs to be left alone, her words occupy a space of variable boundaries that intertwines different possibilities. Her words can simultaneously be taken as a cry against the parents’ stifling order, against the game, or as a reaction against the confined physical space in which they find themselves. In broader terms, her words can also be read as a protest against the
world and stage. Nevertheless, the crucial element is to understand that the game’s complex structure prevents Beba’s protest from being pinned down to a single specific context. This scene thus reveals that it is clearly a simplification to speak of the characters’ explicit desire for rebellion uniquely as a collective cry against the parents’ authority.

I would now like to return momentarily to the major critical trends through which Triana’s play has been regarded. The critics who hailed La noche de los asesinos as a revolutionary play sustained that Triana, through the representation of a generational conflict, gestured towards the need for a revolution during Batista’s abusive regime. Conversely, those who denounced the play as a counterrevolutionary piece maintained that Triana, through this same conflict, was implying the cyclic nature of revolution and gesturing towards the future fall of the present one. The commonality shared by the two contrary views is that they regard La noche de los asesinos as an allegory of the Cuban revolution. They allegorize the domestic conflict and situate it within a historical context, either before or after Castro’s coming to power, in order to support their own ideological inclinations. Countering these views, I contend that Triana’s play is not guided by a revolutionary intent. I posit instead that the dramatic action in all its complexities is symptomatic of the turbulence and chaos that a revolution produces in its processes of realization. Furthermore, I propose that within this chaotic context of disarray, the rebellious desire of the characters constitutes an attempt to assert their own sense of being (their own subjectivity) in a world of collapsed structures and shattered paradigms.

The most representative line of La noche de los asesinos is the phrase that the characters repeat at different instances in the dramatic action: “La sala no es la sala. La sala es la cocina” (“The living room is not the living room. The living room is the kitchen.”) This line has traditionally been interpreted as the paradigmatic example of Lalo, Cuca, and Beba’s rebellious
urge to subvert the existing order in an attempt to create a new one. It is necessary to examine two instances in which this phrase appears in the dialogue to see the limitations of such reading. Towards the end of the first act, Lalo begins to rub one knife against another instilling the action with a screeching rhythm that leads the characters to “un clímax delirante” (“a delirious climax.”) Soon after, Cuca begins to sing in a faint voice the recurring line –“La sala no es la sala. La sala es la cocina”– as both sisters stand with their backs to the audience and occupy opposite sides of the stage. Suddenly, the sisters emit “un grito desgarrador” (“a heartrending cry”) and fall to their knees. The murder has been perpetrated. Lalo enters with the knife in his hands and asks for silence, but the sisters continue to whisper the suggestive chant about the living room being the kitchen (98-100). The second instance takes place towards the end of the second act. Cuca and Lalo are immersed in a heated discussion, Cuca acting the role of the mother and Lalo pretending to be the father. Their discussion develops simultaneously and in strong interrelation with Beba’s singing of the phrase, which begins with grunts and slowly develops into a sweet tonality. Lalo and Cuca’s discussion escalates into violence, but is forcefully interrupted by Beba’s euphoric impersonation of Lalo:

BEBA. (Como LALO. Gritando y moviéndose en forma de círculo por el escenario.) Hay que quitar las alfombras. Vengan abajo las cortinas. La sala no es la sala. La sala es la cocina. El cuarto no es el cuarto. El cuarto es el inodoro. (BEBA está en el extremo opuesto a LALO, de espaldas al público. LALO, también de espaldas al público, se va doblando paulatinamente. En un grito espantoso.) Ayyyyy. (Entre sollozos.) Veo a mi madre muerta. Veo a mi padre degollado. (En un grito.) ¡Hay que tumbar esta casa!
[BEBA. (As LALO. Yelling and moving in circles around the stage.) We have to take the rugs off. Bring the curtains down. The living room is not the living room. The living room is the kitchen. The bedroom is not the bedroom. The bedroom is the toilet. (BEBA is opposite to LALO, with her back to the audience. LALO, also with his back to the audience, begins bending slowly. A horrid cry.) Aaaaah. (Sobbing.) I see my dead mother. I see my father with a slit throat. (Screaming.) This house has to be torn down!] (127)

The game concludes with these words and Lalo begs for the door to be opened. The sisters briefly discuss the outcome of the game and the play ends, as already mentioned, with Beba’s assertion that it is now her turn to lead the game.

The two scenes mark climactic instances of high emotional intensity and dramatic ambiguity that problematize the straightforward reading of the siblings’ phrase as an expression of rebellion. To begin with, it must be noted that Lalo, the character who is usually most associated with the phrase and regarded as the leader of the revolt, never utters these words. It is Beba who puts the phrase in Lalo’s mouth, but only through her mediated action of impersonation. This detail indicates that the suggestive power of the phrase is strictly related to the dramatic context in which it occurs. The two scenes are emotionally charged instances in which the characters seem to function in a heightened state of consciousness, which Triana describes as a delirious climax. During these peaks language and voice significantly change in tonality and intonation. In the first act, Cuca faintly sings the phrase before the two sisters emit a horrid cry that physically impacts their bodies and brings them to their knees. In the second act, Beba begins to grunt before her words become intelligible and turn the recurrent phrase into a sweet tune. Soon after, when Lalo and Cuca end their discussion, Beba frantically yells the same
words and ends her speech with another horrid cry previous to Lalo’s breakdown, which also brings him down to his knees. The faint singing, sweet voicing, and yelling of “La sala no es la sala. La sala es la cocina” are all different intonations that map the emotional state of the characters at the moment of enunciating the phrase. Nonetheless, it is the grunts and cries that precede and succeed these words that truly reveal the emotional intensity and excess that corporally break the characters. These grunts and cries stand at the threshold of language signaling, through their unintelligible character, the inexpressible despair that the characters experience in their life and game.

In her influential study *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry conceptualizes torture in ways that illuminate our understanding of Beba, Lalo, and Cuca. Scarry devotes the first chapter of her book to the examination of torture; an act that she construes as a “structure of unmaking” that in its most basic expression is an “appropriation, aping, and reversing of the action of creating itself” (21). Scarry’s essential understanding of torture as a phenomenological experience that entails the unmaking of the world is based on the premise that torture obliterates the subject. Once the subject is destroyed, there is no consciousness to recognize the world and thus the objective collapses (the world is unmade) and torture is complete. The imperative and reciprocal relation between the annihilation of the subject and the unmaking of the world concretizes when Scarry discusses how a familiar space such as a household (filled with items such as domestic goods) can become the unimaginable space of torture:

But it is also crucial to see that the two [the human being and the weapon] are here forced into being expressions and amplifications of one another: the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process externalizing the way in which the
person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of
the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of
the pain. That is, in the conversion of a refrigerator into a bludgeon, the refrigerator
disappears; its disappearance objectifies the disappearance of the world (sky, country,
bench) experienced by a person in great pain; and it is the very fact of disappearance, its
transition from a refrigerator into a bludgeon, that inflicts the pain. (41)
The disintegration of the object represents the collapse of the objective realm. The moment that
the refrigerator ceases to be a refrigerator and becomes a weapon, the fixed structures of
reference shatter and the object becomes incongruous with its own functionality. In this instance,
the refrigerator could become any other object, but given the context of torture, it will
necessarily become an object of punishment. Hence, the objective realm enters a randomized
space in which suffering and pain come to be the determining factors, and this predominance of
affect over the world of objects indicates that the objective realm has collapsed into the
subjective one. Nonetheless, the tortured individual can no longer sustain the frame of
subjectivity and crushes under the weight of the collapsed world. Hence, as Scarry perceptively
notes, this reciprocity between the de-objectified object and the person’s awareness of that
disjunction inflicts pain and becomes the act of torture itself.

Clearly, in La noche de los asesinos there is no act of torture. However, the process of
objective and subjective disintegration that concretizes in a contingent space governed by affect
also best describes the climactic instances of the dramatic action. I have already discussed the
subjective disintegration of the characters as spectral bodies occupied by a plurality of other
identities; now I will focus on the instability of the world they inhabit. Taking into account
Scarry’s theorization, I posit that the recurrent phrase “La sala no es la sala. La sala es la cocina”
masterfully synthesizes the collapse of the objective realm in which an object loses its own referential actuality and enters the aleatory dynamics of chaos. Every object can be perceived as another, the room can be the kitchen because the objective realm no longer possesses an organizing structure that can adequately distribute essence or fix identity to matter.

At the pivotal instances of heightened emotion, the disjointed world of the characters equals their own fragmented condition, and their recurrence to grunts and unintelligible, heartrending screams expresses the despair towards that unmade world on which they can no longer rely. The utter collapse of the objective and subjective realms leaves nothing to the characters but a residual stratum of exhaustion, confusion, and unexplainable emotional boredom.

Taylor also speaks of objective and subjective collapse in her aforementioned book *The Theatre of Crisis*. In her discussion of Latin American theatre of the sixties as a theatre essentially about crisis:

I refer to crisis in the more general sense of a “turning point” between death and regeneration, taking into account both the objective systematic shifts or ruptures (revolution, military takeover, wars and civil wars) that affect the nature of the society as a whole and the subjective, personal experience of disorientation and loss of identity. (6)

Although I utilize Taylor’s same terminology about objective and subjective crises, her employment of these terms develops within a broader framework. Taylor’s theorization implies a dual process of disintegration that situates the theatre of crisis halfway between Europe and Latin America. Taylor distinguishes the Latin American theatre of crisis from the European theatre of the absurd and from the Latin American theatre of protest. In her view, the theatre of the absurd explores the decomposition of the individual “within a stable, bourgeois context,” and the theatre of protest shows sociopolitical rupture through firm and stable individuals (9, 52-3). But, as she
sustains in her definition of crisis, the theatre of crisis explores the frailty of both the objective context and subjective consciousness. Taylor’s study importantly situates Triana and his contemporaries within a broader dramaturgical context by granting geographical and historical breadth to her argument. However, and although I owe much to Taylor’s insightful theorization, my interest here is showing how specifically within the theatrical space of *La noche de los asesinos* there is a dual process of disintegration in which the objective and subjective collapse mutually implicate one another in a way that describes the ultimate consequences of the characters’ game.

To illustrate this, I would like to refer to one last example that further reveals the critical process of disjuncture and collapse in relation to the central event of the murder. This is the only time that Lalo pronounces the recurring phrase and he does so in a monologue directed to Cuca, who is pretending to be the district attorney that prosecutes him for his parricidal crime. After pronouncing the well known words, Lalo proceeds:

> Si me sentaba en una silla, la silla no era la silla, sino el cadáver de mi padre. Si cogía un vaso de agua, sentía que tenía entre las manos el cuello húmedo de mi madre muerta. Si jugaba con el florero, caía de pronto un enorme cuchillo al suelo. Si limpiaba las alfombras, jamás terminaba, porque se agigantaba un duro coágulo de sangre.

[If I sat on a chair, the chair was not the chair; it was my dad’s corpse. If I grabbed a glass of water, I felt that I had my dead mother’s moist neck in my hands. If I played with a vase, suddenly a big knife fell to the ground. If I cleaned the rugs, it never ended because a big clot of blood began to spread.] (119)

Lalo’s words describe a shattered world in which every object has disintegrated and has subsequently been reshaped through the burden of emotional distress. In other words, the house,
represented by every minute object, has collapsed into the tainted spectrum of the crime. House and crime thus stand as a determining frame that suffocates the characters and infinitely strains them with its emotional demands. I propose that the desire for rebellion, often simplified and misconstrued as a planned attempt to challenge the parents’ authority, is instead a visceral reaction against this asphyxiating space in which the objective and the subjective have crumbled into the contingency of delirium and imaginary action. Beba dictates: “¡Hay que tumbar esta casa!” (“This house has to come down!”) Similarly, Lalo culminates his monologue asserting: “(En un éxtasis musical.) ‘Mata a tus padres.’ La casa entera, todo, me exigia ese acto heroico” (“(In musical ecstasy.) ‘Kill your parents.’ The whole house, everything, demanded this heroic act”) (120). The heroic act, to kill the parents, is essentially a cry to finally execute the crime and transcend the alienating game of perpetual representations that robs the characters of their own sense of self. It is, namely, a cry to reclaim the structures of the world; or, in Scarry’s terms, to recreate a world that has been unmade. In short, in La noche de los asesinos the characters are immersed in a world of absolute chaos, unfixed boundaries, and disintegrated selves that emotionally presses them to reclaim a house that is a house and a self that is their own.

**Revolution and its burden on subjectivity**

I situate the utterly chaotic and disjointed world that Triana’s characters inhabit within the framework of revolution; but by this I do not mean the Cuban revolution in its specificity, but the idea of revolution. The word revolution is etymologically based in the Latin word *revolvere*, which literally translates to ‘roll back.’ The action of rolling-back is evident when the word is utilized in the context of mechanics, but it is also relevant in its political and sociological meaning of describing a sudden and radical change. This notion of radical change and its implied
relation to violence relates to the theatrical space in *La noche de los asesinos*: the contingent space of broken structures and undetermined boundaries of the play resembles, in its physical and emotional dimensions, the world that a revolution implies through its violent impositions of drastic change.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon denounces the colonial world as a fundamental locus of violence. He posits that the colonial system is characterized by a symbiotic relationship between the settler and the native that determines their mutual existence: the settler exists because there is an oppressed native, and as long as this oppressed native continues to exist (as long as there is a colonial system) the settler too will continue to exist (30). Fanon’s conceptualization of the colonial world reveals exploitation, naturalized through economic and social structures, as the determining factor that links oppressor to oppressed and vice versa. From this perspective, the process of decolonization relies principally on severing the bond of exploitation and with it the entire infrastructure that sustains the colonial system. This prompts Fanon to argue that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (29). However, a careful reading of Fanon reveals that violence within the process of decolonization is as much an element intrinsic to the process itself, as it is a tool of change utilized by the oppressed in his or her new ability to act as an agent. My interest here is to regard Fanon’s approach to decolonization as an exemplary discussion about revolution that comments on the contingent and non-contingent elements of historical processes and on the role of the agent in regards to his or her power of execution.

In order to fully examine these two elements, it is helpful to consider Idelber Avelar’s interpretation of Fanon:
The fundamental issue for Fanon is that as long as there is capitalism, violence is not only ubiquitous but also, by definition, predicated on colonial or neo-colonial forms of exploitation. Although he never explicitly theorized it as such, the resolution of Fanon’s account of violence—the endpoint of the colonial master-slave dialectic—demanded a Trotskyite-type permanent revolution. In Fanon’s work the violent destruction of colonial and neo-colonial structures is not, from the standpoint of the oppressed, something over which much of a choice remains. For the native the process of violently destroying colonialism is not a contingent, unimportant one but rather the very process through which s/he accedes to subjectivity. (7)

We shall first focus on revolution as a historical process. Avelar argues that Fanon’s theorization of violence ultimately entails the need for permanent revolution. Avelar’s contention follows a discussion on the significance of violence in Marxism in which he explains: “In Marxism it is axiomatic that revolutionary violence brings with itself, by definition, the promise of an end to violence as such” (2004 5). This Marxist axiom is present in Fanon’s positing of violence as the intrinsic element of decolonization through which the violence and the many methods of exploitation of the colonial world are to be abolished. Avelar, nevertheless, sustains that Fanon implies the need for permanent revolution because he reads Fanon as a theorizer of the “global dialectic of violence.” Through this lens, violence becomes insurmountable because the economic and social dynamics that guide our contemporary world institute violence in a way that cannot successfully be overturned through a single war or instance of decolonization. Therefore, developing methods of neo-colonialism demand new revolutions that not only are incapable of completely abolishing the violence of an ever-transforming colonial or neo-colonial world, but that also perpetuate violence in its own attempts of realization.
This understanding of revolution, marked by the ubiquity of violence, shows both the contingent and non-contingent character of revolution. On the one hand, revolution is not an accidental phenomenon that occurs fortuitously, but rather is a historical development determined, justified, and, most importantly, instigated by specific social, political, and economic situations. This is the rationale behind Fanon’s call for decolonization. On the other hand, revolution as a historical process comprises innumerable complexities and variables that cannot possibly be synthesized, analyzed, or fully conjectured through the limited understanding of an individual. Hence, revolution also possesses a contingent dimension in which violence can always manifest in unpredictable ways. Illuminating this dual nature of the revolutionary process, Fanon writes:

Decolonisation, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously a programme of complete disorder (…) Decolonisation, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. (29-30)

Fanon’s entire study is in itself an attempt to discern the movements that historically articulate the process of decolonization, but in his wording there is already an implied sense of limitation about the details and instances that remain beyond the intelligible and apprehensible scope of human reasoning and theorization. This paradoxical condition of revolution as a historical process that must be understood in order to be guided and realized, but which through its very nature defies said understanding, speaks to human limitations. Such limitations would appear to be mainly a cognitive barrier, but what they truly represent is a question about agency. The
paradoxical character of history makes us question the extent to which a subject can consciously understand and act in a complex and violent historical process such as a revolution.

This fundamental question is examined in La noche de los asesinos through the dramatic lens of performance. The characters’ desire for rebellion, which has been described as a visceral reaction against a shattered world, constitute—and I here return to Avelar’s reading of Fanon—an attempt to acquire subjectivity. The chaotic world that they occupy is a world that resembles the space of revolution. It is essentially a space of crisis with no stable order that can organize the world into set categories and correspondent identities. It is a world that has been disrupted by a violent phenomenon set out “to change the order of the world.” Within this unstable world, the characters have no ontological certainty. Lalo, Cuca, and Beba engage in a myriad of representations in which every instance of role-playing becomes an erratic attempt to transcend their ontological crisis. Lalo wants to become Lalo; an autonomous self no longer refracted into ephemeral impersonations that exhaust him emotionally. Cuca and Beba also seek their own identity beyond the contingencies of performance. Nevertheless, the vertiginous game they obsessively rehearse only succeeds at perpetuating the violence embedded in the fragmentary condition that denies them a concrete sense of their own subjectivity.

Fanon further comments on the construction of subjectivity in Black Skin, White Masks as he examines the ontological experience of black people in a colonized and acculturated society. He frames his discussion in the Hegelian dialectics of recognition, which posits that self-consciousness exists in itself to the extent that it is recognized and acknowledged by another.\(^7\) Fanon argues on this account: “Each consciousness of self is seeking absoluteness. It wants to be

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\(^7\) Fanon opens the section “The Black Man and Hegel” in his chapter “The Black Man and Recognition” with the following quote of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind: “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged and recognized” (191).
recognized as an essential value outside of life, as transformation of subjective certainty
\((\text{Gewissheit})\) into objective truth \((\text{Wahrheit})\)” (192). The development from subjective certainty
to objective truth presupposes a sense of ontological coherence that the subject must possess to
demand and expect the recognition of another. In Fanon’s writing such an assumption is central
because he is arguing for black consciousness to be acknowledged in its true essence beyond the
burden of white masks and colonizing impositions. It is through these means that black
consciousness could enter the realm of recognition and successfully be concretized as an
objective truth.

Fanon’s argumentation posits consciousness and identity as concrete and formed
concepts that must be revealed and recognized. However, \textit{La noche de los asesinos} shows us
how in a moment of absolute crisis such a subjective certainty of the individual that sustains its
desire to be objectively recognized simply cannot exist. We have seen how Lalo, Beba, and Cuca
are immersed in an environment of crisis that disables them from possessing the certainty of their
own subjectivity. Through them, Triana shows a cruder and darker possibility of human
existence: not only is the subject not recognized by the other on the level of human existence –
nothing is further away from Lalo, Cuca, and Beba than the possibility of entering the objective
realm of truth–, but this subject, failing to account for his or her own subjective consciousness,
cannot experience or express his or her own concrete existence. This radical ontological problem
that Triana poses refers us back to one of the central ontological questions that we identified in
Fanon about the subject’s capacity to productively act in the midst of the contingent and non-
contingent variables of a historical process.

\textit{La noche de los asesinos} in its radical dramatic world offers a tragic response to this
ontological question. Crucial here is to note that the characters’ convoluted game keeps them
from acting coherently and consequently. We have seen that their actions are erratic, even
delirious, and follow non-continuous paths that obscure the notions of purpose and intentionality.
The best example is Cuca’s unexplained shift between the first act and the second one in which
her strong rejection against the game turns into an equally vigorous desire to lead the murderous
performance. This lack of continuity in the characters’ actions is essentially a negation of
agency; the siblings cannot lead the course of their lives or advance toward a set goal. But
attached to this truncated agency is a deeper limitation related to the characters’ cognitive
capabilities. Lalo, Cuca, and Beba cannot comprehend their chaotic surroundings; they are
unable to make sense of their critical situation and fail to understand the physical and emotional
burden that the game imposes on them. Furthermore, their fragmentary and imperfect
understanding prompts them to keep engaging in endless cycles or representation that perpetuate
the ontological violence that bars them from transcending their situation. Thus, Triana’s
characters are tragic individuals bereaved of transcendence. From this perspective, I would like
to suggest that they are dramatic imaginations of the historical subject unable to comprehend or
assertively act within the vortex of history, and this is a condition that ultimately swallows the
subject and its elusive subjectivity.

This leads us to contend that *La noche de los asesinos* is not as much a play about
revolution, as it is a play about the effects of revolution. The play examines the ontological
consequences that the shattering violence of revolution can entail; the limitations of action and
perception that a dislocated world of collapsing structures can impose on the subject; and the
fundamental sense of disorientation that governs the development and realization of an immense
historical process which in its essence precludes the individual’s clarity of understanding. But
also tangentially, through Lalo, Cuca, and Beba, the play details the human desire to understand,
organize, direct, and transcend spaces and moments of crisis. Understanding the play from this viewpoint enables us to consider the extent to which *La noche de los asesinos* speaks about the experience of the Cuban revolution. The play constitutes a brilliant dramatic imagination of the subject and his or her physical, emotional, and subjective struggle to participate, comprehend, and cope with the overpowering and manifold demands of history. The undeniable relevance of *La noche de los asesinos* is that it tackles the question of *being* and through it the historical question of *being in the revolution*.

**Piñera and the significance of fear**

The fundamental question of being in the revolution can be further examined through Virgilio Piñera’s profound psychological and emotional distress experienced during the initial stages of the revolution. This initial stage was a definitive time of turmoil and transition for all Cuban writers and artists. Triana was beginning his dramaturgic and theatrical career when the new regime came into power, but Piñera was already a recognized and respected writer with important narrative and dramatic publications. His novel *La carne de René (René’s Flesh)* (1952), short story anthology *Cuentos fríos (Cold Tales)* (1956), and play *Electra Garrigó* (1959) evidenced the success of his literary career. With the establishment of the new regime, Piñera was confronted with the difficulty of reconsidering the intellectual and ideological role of his literary work within the new order. But as the decade of the sixties advanced, Piñera continued exploring his cosmopolitan interests and writing avant-gardist works that were harshly criticized and condemned by the new government. As we have seen, Triana followed a similar path. He developed an internationally successful career writing innovative and politically ambivalent plays that were equally censured and rejected within Cuba. Both writers were
similarly ostracized and excluded from the cultural and literary scene, but continued to write texts that display acute awareness of their social and historical surroundings. The experience of both two writers tells an important story about the practice of writing theatre during politically turbulent times, but Piñera’s experience in particular illuminates the personal and intellectual struggle of a writer during times of radical political change.

In 1961, Cuba’s cultural scene was shaken by the controversy surrounding the short film *P.M.* (*Post Meridiem*). The short film was aired on national television in a show titled *Lunes de revolución* (*Revolution Mondays*) in which intellectuals such as José Triana, Virgilio Piñera, Antón Arrufat, and José Rodríguez Feo often collaborated. The film candidly captured the nightlife of Havana as a hidden camera silently roamed through some of its popular bars and discos. But the Commission for the Reviewing of Films censured the short film soon after its airing, contending that its quasi-pornographic content was contrary to the interests of the Revolution because it showed a degrading and detrimental image of the Cuban people (Lobato Morchón 260). Following the censorship, the government organized a grand cultural gathering, presumably to discuss the short film, but in reality to firmly communicate to all Cuban artists and writers –more than 500 intellectuals were summoned– that the revolution needed (and demanded) their absolute ideological allegiance. The event was symbolically presided by Castro himself, who closed the meeting with his famous speech “Words to the Intellectuals.” In this speech Castro vehemently states:

. . . dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución nada. Contra la Revolución nada, porque la Revolución tiene también sus derechos y el primer derecho de la Revolución es el derecho a existir y frente al derecho de la Revolución de ser y de existir, nadie . . .
¿Cuáles son los derechos de los escritores y de los artistas revolucionarios o no revolucionarios? Dentro de la Revolución: todo; contra la Revolución ningún derecho. [. . .] within the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, nothing. Against the revolution nothing because the Revolution has its rights and its first right is to exist, and against the Revolution’s right to be and exist, no one . . . What are the rights of revolutionary or not revolutionary writers and artists? Within the Revolution, all; against the Revolution, none.] (12)

In his extensive speech, Castro declares with absolute severity that all Cuban art must comply with the cause of the revolution and that aesthetic values should be compromised for ideological ones. The marked and growing limitations that the government imposed on artistic production became a pervasive problem that afflicted many Cuban writers and intellectuals during the decade of the sixties. Among the many writers who now faced the dilemma between their professional integrity and their fervent support for the ideals of the revolution, stood Virgilio Piñera.

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8 Another important document that shows the government’s growing ideological demands is the “Declaration of principles of the first national seminary of theatre” published in 1968. This document states: “Everything that stops our development must be destroyed, intercepting ideological deviations and putting our creation to the service of the people” (qtd. In Meyran 28).

9 The paradigmatic example is of course the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla. The internationally-famous Padilla Affair wonderfully illustrates the regime’s intolerance towards ideological difference or sustained criticism within the Cuban intellectual scene. In 1971 Padilla was incarcerated for his award-winning poetic anthology Fuera del Juego (Out of the Game) (1968) and its open critique to Castro’s regime. Padilla was asked to perform an officially-staged act of self-criticism in which he accused himself of being counterrevolutionary for having perpetrated political crimes. The farcical semblance of the trial created a vigorous reaction of disapproval that engaged many and important intellectuals around the world. The Padilla Affair became a crucial turning point that forced many Latin American artists and intellectuals into a position of sympathy and allegiance to the Cuban revolution, or one of distancing and open denunciation.
Toward the end of 1958, when Castro’s coming to power was imminent, Piñera returned to Havana after his twelve-year long exile in Buenos Aires. \(^{10}\) By this time, Piñera was already a well-known and respected novelist, short story writer, and playwright in the Cuban intellectual and literary milieu. His recognized status turned him into an important literary model for many young writers, but the unique and often eccentric character of his writings increasingly eluded the fierce ideological wants of the revolution. Nevertheless, Piñera’s initial relationship to the revolution was one of enthusiasm and support. In May 1959, Piñera published a relatively unknown article titled “La inundación” ("The Flood") in which he recounts the historical night that Castro entered Havana. \(^{11}\) Piñera sets off with a celebratory tone that praises the arrival of the revolution through the cheerful description of the Cuban people flooding the streets to reclaim their freedom and power from Batista. However, as the narration develops, Piñera begins to digress into minute details that in turn flood his narration with historical, literary, and mythological allusions that broadly include Rome, Jesus, Victor Hugo, Napoleon, and Marilyn Monroe, among others. Towards the end of the article, his celebratory tone turns into a markedly sardonic one that mocks the excessive bureaucracy instilled by the revolution, which he terms as “la ‘inundación patética’ ” ("the ‘pathetic flood’"). The article concludes with his caricaturing of the sudden appearance of innumerable "writers" that do not write but lack no reserve when having to express their fervent patriotic zeal. The text is a prime example of Piñera’s complex and dynamic relationship with the revolution in which writing always played a fundamental role.

\(^{10}\) Piñera’s exile was actually divided into three separate periods: February 1946 to December 1947, February 1950 to May 1954, and January 1955 to November 1958.

\(^{11}\) The article was published in the last number of Ciclón. Ciclón, founded in 1955 by José Rodríguez Feo, was a magazine targeted to a minor group of intellectuals familiar and interested in European aesthetic and philosophic developments. The magazine had an explicit apolitical character. Ricardo Lobato Morchón describes it as “la generatriz del absurdismo cubano” (“the generational seed of Cuban absurdism”) (75).
Nonetheless, as the regime limited communicative spaces for thinking and articulating the manifold processes of the revolution, writing became an introspective activity for Piñera that questioned his own consciousness and considered with anxiety the reception of his work in the revolutionary context.

In his introduction to Piñera’s *Teatro Completo* (*Complete Theatre*), Rine Leal contends that Piñera’s polemic character led him to live a life of perpetual contradiction that found its best aesthetic expression in his dramaturgical production (ix). This perpetual contradiction is evident in his much-cited prologue “Piñera Teatral” (“Theatrical Piñera”) in which he argues that he is Existentialist and absurdist precisely because he is a Cuban writer. To prove his point, Piñera famously claims to have written *Electra Garrigó* before Jean Paul Sartre published *Les mouches*, and *Falsa alarma* (*False Alarm*) before Eugène Ionesco published and performed *La cantatrice chauve* (15). Ricardo Lobato Morchón suggests that Piñera’s controversial assertion should be read as a self-justificatory attempt through which he sought to confront and dismiss the suspicions held by orthodox revolutionary supporters who saw in the work of a homosexual cosmopolitan an utter lack of political commitment (264). The reading of Piñera’s prologue as an impulse of self-justification lays bare his profound anxiety towards the incongruity between his support for the revolution—after all, he was an official and highly-regarded member of the UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba)—and his aesthetic inclinations, which defied the ideological explicitness demanded by the regime. Piñera’s increasingly contradictory situation evolved into a personal crisis that was significantly determined by fear.

Returning to the infamous gathering of intellectuals presided by Castro, it is now pertinent to mention Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s description of the event. In *Vidas para leerlas* (*Lives to Be Read*) he recounts how the event began with the screening and subsequent
condemnation of the short film *P.M.* Soon after, Osvaldo Dórticos, the moderator and Minister of Revolutionary Laws, asked the audience to openly comment on the film and the role of the intellectual in the revolution. At this point in the narration, Cabrera Infante offers this magnificent anecdote:

> Tras esta última palabra se hizo el vacío y el silencio, que crecieron embarazosos. Ya iba a decir Dórticos: “Hablen o cállense para siempre” cuando de pronto la persona más improbable, toda tímida y encogida, se levantó de su asiento y parecía que iba a darse a la fuga, pero fue hasta el micrófono de las intervenciones y declaró: “Yo quiero decir que tengo mucho miedo. No sé por qué tengo ese miedo pero eso es todo lo que tengo que decir”. Era por supuesto Virgilio Piñera, que había expresado lo que muchos en el salón sentían y no tenían valor de decir públicamente, ante aquel panel imponente, frente a la presencia temible y armada de Fidel Castro.

[After this last word, silence became embarrassing. Dórticos was about to say: “Speak or forever hold your peace” when suddenly the most improbable and shy person stood up from his seat and, although seemingly wanting to escape, walked to the microphone and stated: “I want to say that I am very scared. I do not know why I have this fear but it is all I want to say.” It was, obviously, Virgilio Piñera who had expressed what many in the room felt but lacked the courage to publically admit in front of that intimidating panel and the fearful and armed presence of Fidel Castro.] (34-5)

This anecdote wonderfully portrays the character of Piñera and it is also important because it situates fear at the core of his relationship with the regime. Piñera’s fear describes a rational reaction toward the aesthetic and ideological challenges that the revolution demanded of his development as a writer and the concrete consequences attached to a possible embrace or
rejection of these challenges. However, fear also sheds light on the ontological challenges brought about by the drastic changes, contingencies, and demands of a newly-established order. Piñera comments on this issue in an interview conducted ten years later after the above-mentioned anecdote:

“Mi teatro soy yo mismo, pero teatralizado. Ahora bien, pertenezco a una época de la historia cubana de grandes inseguridades –económica, social, cultural, política–. Entonces no es azar que las refleje en la escena. El ente social inseguro vive su inseguridad como un absurdo y se defiende de ella con la sátira.”

[I am my own theatre, but theatricalized. I belong to a time of great uncertainties – economic, social, cultural, political – in the Cuban history. It is not by chance that I reflect them onstage. The uncertain social being lives its uncertainty as an absurdity and defends against it with satire.] (Casey 69)

Piñera’s words detail his experience within the shifting and unstable world that the historical process of a revolution comprises. He establishes uncertainty as the definite bond between being and writing. This uncertainty shaped his life in its historical context and also his theatrical writing, which brings us back to Leal’s contention that Piñera’s life of perpetual contradiction concretized in his dramatic creations. I will now proceed to examine how the uncertainty and violence of revolution situates the historical subject in an absolute state of vulnerability that is expressed in the affective specificity of fear. With this purpose, I will focus on Piñera’s play *Dos viejos pánicos*, which is precisely a dramatic exploration of a fragile existence determined and circumscribed by fear.

*Dos viejos pánicos* was awarded the prestigious prize Casa de las Américas two years after Triana received it for *La noche de los asesinos*. The play was the last one Piñera was ever
permitted to publish in Cuba, although he would never see this or any of his other plays performed on the Cuban stage.12 *Dos viejos pánicos* is a play about a terrified old couple. It resembles *La noche de los asesinos* in its cyclic structure, the constricted space in which the action develops, and the game as a thematic and structural element. Piñera’s play is also divided into two acts. In the first act, a white light reveals the couple’s room and two single beds at each side of the stage. In one bed sits Tabo, the old man, with his back to the audience frantically cutting magazines. On the other bed sits Tota, the old woman, facing the audience. Tota asks Tabo if he wants to play, but Tabo rejects the offer because he is too busy cutting the figures of young people. Tota threatens Tabo to show him his own reflection in the mirror and Tabo immediately decides to join the game. The game thus begins; Tota and Tabo pretend to kill one another and once dead proceed to explore the possibility of transcending fear. The second act takes place in the same room with the same white lighting. Tota and Tabo are fantasizing about a renewed attempt to kill their fear when Tota exclaims that since they are both dead then there is nothing to fear anymore. The light gradually fades and suddenly a beam of white light appears in the centre of the stage, which is the material representation of fear. Tota and Tabo fight the beam of light, which they try to beat and asphyxiate, but it continues to grow until it eventually covers the entire stage. Terrified and exhausted, the old couple decides to conclude the game. Tota tells Tabo that they will eat “carne con miedo” (“meat with fear”) the next day and they both agree on the many similar days and nights that will succeed this one.

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12 *Dos viejos pánicos* was first staged in Bogota in 1969 by the experimental theatre group La Mama. It acquired a modest international recognition that would gradually see the restoration of Piñera into the Cuban dramaturgical scene. In 1992, thirteen years after Piñera’s death, *Dos viejos pánicos* was finally allowed to be staged in Cuba and in 1997 the International Theatre Festival of Havana was dedicated to the life and work of the formerly censured and marginalized writer. To this day, Piñera is one of the most recognized literary figures in Cuba and many cultural events continue to be organized in honour of his work throughout 2012, which marks the centenary of his birth.
It is important to note that the development of the dramatic action is punctuated by the characters’ awareness and disgust towards their old and aching bodies. Towards the beginning of the play, Tabo is busy cutting the pictures of young people that he will later burn. Tota mocks Tabo for his envious hatred of youth and proceeds to describe their bodies in a way that further infuriates her husband:

(Se pasa las manos por todo el cuerpo. Ríe grotescamente, agarra a Tabo por un brazo y lo aproxima a su cara.) Mira, por aquí arrugas, y por aquí más arrugas, y por aquí patas de gallina, y por aquí bolsas, y por aquí cráteres, y por aquí zanjas. (Vuelve a reír.) Y por aquí (se toca los senos) me llegan a la barriga, y las manos, ¡mírame las manos!, no pueden más con la artritis. (Pausa.) Y tú estás peor que yo. Todos mis achaques, y encima de eso, tu próstata… Al menos yo todavía no me orino, pero tú, un reguero, viejito, un reguero… Más el olor. (Escupe.)

[(She runs her hands over her body laughing grotesquely. She grabs Tabo by his arm and brings him close to her face.) Look, wrinkles here, and more wrinkles here, and crow’s feet here, and bags here, and craters here, and ditches here. (She laughs again.) And here (she touches her breasts) they come down to my belly, and the hands, look at my hands!, they can’t take arthritis any more. (Pause.) You are even worse. All of my ailments and on top of that your prostate… At least I don’t pee myself, but you, a mess, old man, a mess… And the smell. (She spits.)] (489)

Tota’s grotesque description posits their bodies as old and dysfunctional masses that oppose the ideal of beauty. As well, the detailing of the painful ailments that bother them constructs their bodies as concrete and physical entities that contrasts with the intangibility of the fear that afflicts them. Fear, although materialized in a beam of light, lacks a body that feels and suffers
and thus pertains to an ethereal realm that rejects the characters’ corporeal burden of age and
physical pain. The characters’ existence, then, is circumscribed within the concrete limits of
 corporality that rejects a metaphysical or transcendent level. This means that their fantasizing
game of exploring death and transcending fear becomes an absurd and grotesque performance
that exercises its own negation.

Attached to the burden of corporality, the dramatic action develops through instances of
violence that further foreground the weight and substantiation of the body. This becomes evident
in the threshold between life and death that they inhabit in order to initiate the game, which
constitutes a scene of verbal and physical attack. Tabo and Tota kick, bite, scratch, and spit on
each other before they proclaim their death and proceed to explore the possibility of overcoming
fear. Interesting, however, is the fact that in their death the characters do not lose sense of their
own corporality. Once immersed in the game, the characters continue to attack and annoy one
another as if their ability to remain dead depended on these cruel instances of mutual
aggressiveness. For instance, in the second act, the characters are terrified because they have to
fill out an official questionnaire about their life choices and current actions. Tota becomes
convinced that Tabo has made up the questionnaire to frighten her and slaps him, unraveling a
dramatic scene of aggression:

TABO. (Forcejea.) Puta mala, puta vieja, te voy a estrangular. (Le echa las manos al
cuello.) Conque quieres echarme el muerto. (Pausa.) Así que me rompo la cabeza
descifrando tu planilla y me pagas con esto. Eres peor que una rata de cloaca.
Pero te voy a estrangular. (Le aprieta el cuello.) Y encima te burlas de mí.
Cabrona, eres tú la que ha cocinado este pastel y ahora me echas el muerto…
TOTA. (Echa las manos al cuello de Tabo.) ¡Hipócrita! Lo que tú quieres es que me muera de verdad. ¡Imbécil! Si tu Tota se muere de verdad, ¿con quién vas a jugar? ¿Tú solo? Pensaste que me iba a morir del susto, pero tengo el corazón más duro que el hierro. (Le echa una zancadilla y ambos ruedan por el suelo.) ¡Farsante, pirata, degenerado!

TABO. (Se encarama sobre Tota y la inmoviliza utilizando sus piernas como tenazas.) Óyelo bien, puta mala, cuando estés muerta no podrás decirme: Tabo, ahora no tengo miedo. No, cabrona, cuando estés muerta serás otro muerto, es decir, nada de nada.

[TABO. (Wrestles.) Evil whore, old whore, I’m going to strangle you. (He throws his hands on her neck.) So you want to blame me. (Pause.) So I kill myself trying to understand the form and this is how you thank me. You’re worse than a sewer rat. But I’m going to strangle you. (He presses her neck.) And on top of that, you laugh at me. Bitch, you’re the one who made this up and now you blame me…

TOTA. (She throws her hands on his neck.) Hypocrite! You just want me to die for real. Moron! If your Tota dies, who are you going to play with? Yourself? You thought that fear would kill me, but my heart is stronger than steel. (She makes him trip and they both roll on the ground.) Impostor, pirate, pervert!

TABO. (He climbs on top of Tota and holds her tight using his legs as tongs.) Listen to me, evil whore, when you die, you won’t be able to tell me: Tabo, I am not scared anymore. No, bitch, when you die, you will just be another dead person, which means, nothing of nothing.] (496)
Tabo’s latter words suggest the conceptual particularity of their understanding of death. In a sense, their game constitutes an impersonation of death that they enjoy and desire precisely because it has the substantial quality that genuine death lacks. Moreover, the characters’ desire for materiality is so strong that in their game their attempt to transcend fear is enacted as a crime in which they pretend to beat and strangle a body. Therefore, paradoxically, Tota and Tabo enjoy playing the game because it enables them to experience the imagination of an existence beyond fear and consequences, but this exercise of imagining necessitates the concreteness of the body to the extent that it envisions a material presence of fear.

I would now like to suggest that the imminent relation between body and fear that develops throughout the dramatic action construes the body as a space of violence and aggression that reflects the shifting dynamics of the revolution. More specifically, fear stands as an internal emotional symptom and manifestation of the external collapsed structures resulting from the radical dynamics of revolution. In this regard, we will focus on the characters’ inability to account for themselves and their consequent failure to construct a coherent sense of self and subjectivity. In an article titled “Self Writing,” Michel Foucault posits that the initial stages of development of the narrative of the self can be found in the correspondence with others, namely, the epistolary genre, which he discusses within the historical specificity of Greco-Roman culture during the first two centuries of the empire. Foucault sustains that the practice of correspondence is “to “show oneself,” to project oneself into view, to make one’s own face appear in the other’s presence” (216). In Foucault’s view, the essential link between the practice of self-writing and the formation of subjectivity is necessarily geared toward the ethical demand of the relationship with the other. The context in which Foucault discusses self-fashioning implies a sympathetic interlocutor because the ascetic of the Greco-Roman empire neither felt nor expressed anguish
toward the reader; he was by nature a self-assured individual. Judith Butler also explores the process of self-fashioning, but she problematizes the subject’s relationship with the other through her discussion of the modern subject. For the modern being, the presence of the other is a source of anxiety because he or she confronts a plural and unsympathetic interlocutor that complicates his or her own process of narration.

The central question of Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* is in what does the “I” consist and “in what terms can it appropriate morality or, indeed, give an account of itself” (7). For the purpose of this discussion, I will not relate the moral questions that Butler tackles in her ethical debate, but rather focus on the “I” and its challenge to give an account of itself. Butler stresses the argument that the “I,” far from being an isolated entity, is a socially implicated one that is limited by its historical context, which “exceeds its own capacities for narration” (8). The notion that the ontology of the “I” is fashioned in relation to a set of social and historical norms implies that this set of norms decides who will and will not be perceived as a subject. In Butler’s own words, these norms determine “what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things” (17). The relationship between the subject’s ontological formation and his or her social and historical milieu provides an illuminating perspective through which we can revisit the discussion about subjective and objective collapse, this time in relation to *Dos viejos pánicos*.

Tota and Tabo, in their persistent corporeal discomfort and emotional distress, map out erratic processes of self-fashioning that produce instead incoherent instances of consciousness and subjectivity. The two characters continuously fall into a delirium of self-negation that obliterates them as intelligible subjects within the unstable dramatic space of their game. The characteristic changeability of the dramatic action, which confuses the boundaries between life
and death, corporeal and immaterial, and action and emotion, speaks of an unstable objective world that cannot sustain the characters’ need for transcendence. What is markedly interesting in Piñera’s play, however, is that this set of determining norms (the game) “precede and exceed” the subjects—to use Butler’s terms—but in turn the game is preceded and exceeded by the characters themselves, who invent and advance the game. This means that in *Dos viejos pánicos* there is a symbiotic relationship between the objective and subjective realms that cannot be dissociated. That is, in the play, the social temporality in which the subject emerges constitutes a convoluted game that does not provide an articulated set of norms in relation to which the characters engage in a process of self-making. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that in Butler’s argumentation this set of norms does not constitute a deterministic element, but rather a field of constraint. Agency, she argues, “takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. This ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free” (19). The struggle of agency in battle with social and historical norms describes the central conflict of tragedy as a clash between freedom and determinism. But in *Dos viejos pánicos* the objective and subjective are so elaborately intertwined that the characters cannot grapple with an exterior set of norms because they themselves create and develop these ‘external’ norms. The game thus constitutes an ambiguous space of action in which the subjective overpowers and annihilates an objective frame of reference. The ultimate consequence in this immanent subjective space is that the characters cannot develop strategies of self-narration through which they can fashion an intelligible self.

Butler and Foucault both develop their examination of self-writing within an ethical debate in which the relation to the other is primarily determined by the subject’s ability to account for him or herself. Butler sustains that although the social exceeds the subject’s abilities
of self-stylization, the subject does become an accountable and recognizable being bound to an innermost ethical responsibility. The unstable and subjective space that governs Dos viejos pánicos is sustained by two fragile and exhausted characters that desire to reach death and inexistence in a paradoxical manner that reasserts their corporeal materiality. The contradiction between immaterial death and corporeal reality negates them as recognizable beings in the face of the other. Moreover, Tota and Tabo display an erratic sense of agency and responsibility that fuels the randomized action of their delirious game. As spectators, we do not witness the coherent actions of self-accountable beings that comprehend their personal dimension in relation to a social landscape. These broken and disoriented selves, who cannot emerge as fully formed and accountable beings, are evidence of a distraught world where fear becomes the quintessential manifestation of the individual’s struggle to survive in a violently shifted space.

Butler importantly argues that the subject is intricately related to the “regime of truth” in the way that the individual’s relation to said regime is also a relation to him or herself. The regime of truth is a term she borrows from Foucault, which refers to the terms or set of norms through which the subject self-constitutes and becomes recognizable. This regime thus “decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being,” but, most importantly, it establishes a reflexive dimension (22). The subject’s questioning of the norms in relation to which he or she constructs him or herself—the norms that govern subjectivation— is also a questioning of the subject’s own truth and ability to account for him or herself:

Critique is not merely of a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself…. It also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the
norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they
might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk
unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions
of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable. (23)

The individual’s questioning of social practices as a menace of his or her intelligible horizon and
recognizability accurately describes Piñera’s condition early in the Cuban revolution. Piñera did
not accommodate to ideological revolutionary demands, but rather continued developing a
poignant oeuvre of ontological exploration and critique that diminished his importance and role
within the national cultural and intellectual context. Through his work’s reflexive questioning
about his relation to the revolution, Piñera risked his own recognizability and as the revolution
continued to gain power and establish itself, he increasingly became a marginalized writer. He
was eventually relegated to the list of censored writers and thus became an invisible subject
excluded from all cultural and literary activity outside his own process of creation. The civil
death imposed on Piñera exemplifies the extent to which the questioning of the regime of truth is
also a questioning of the self that risks effacing his or her own recognizability in the face of the
others.

Piñera’s situation shows that indeed the social temporality the subject inhabits is essential
for his or her self-constitution, but Tota and Tabo further dramatize this condition in a way that
illuminates the true significance of fear. Piñera’s characters lack a stable objective context in
relation to which they can define and shape their own sense of self; this situates them in a state of
utter vulnerability that concretizes in the emotion of fear. Fear constitutes a visceral impulse of
survival that, on the one hand, reveals a sense of frailty, and on the other hand, prompts a
mechanism of defense. For Tota and Tabo, however, fear constitutes a strategy of self-fashioning
through which they attempt to reassert their own existence. The lack of an objective realm through which they can become intelligible and recognizable beings terrifies them because it reveals to them the fragility of their existence, the possibility of becoming no one, like Piñera, but it also gives purpose and meaning to their lives because the charade of killing fear becomes a practice and reassertion of existence. This explains the paradoxical nature of their game in which they imagine death as a material state that necessitates the actuality of the body. At one point, Tota reminds Tabo of the apparent futility of their game: “Claro, se te olvida porque tienes miedo de recordarlo. Pero yo te voy a refrescar la memoria. (Pausa.) Cada vez que tratamos de matarlo [al miedo], lo único que conseguimos es tener más miedo.” (“Of course you forget it because you’re afraid of remembering. But let me refresh your memory. (Pause.) Every time we try to kill it [fear], the only thing we achieve is feeling more fear”) (498). Tota’s words reveal the ubiquitous presence of fear, which can be interpreted as their necessary strategy to continue reasserting a sense of self when there is no longer an objective frame that can sustain a process of recognition or self-constitution.

In this sense, Tota and Tabo further expose the experiential struggle of the subject in the revolution. As we have seen, Lalo, Cuca, and Beba are overpowered beings who in the flux of history’s realization fail to comprehend their surroundings and act in meaningful ways. Tota and Tabo add the dimension of fear and draw a more elaborate picture of the historical subject. This subject is aware of his or her total vulnerability because when social and historical frames shift or collapse it implies a new set of norms through which the subject has to exercise a new process of self-creation. Individual subjectivity thus enters a state of redefinition that shatters a stable sense of identity. In short, Triana and Piñera’s characters dramatize the ontological implications of revolution when the objective world collapses and leaves behind confused and
discombobulated beings that cannot achieve a coherent sense of self. But in a beautiful paradox, the subject embraces that sordid and most-threatening fear because ultimately, in its intense emotional charge, it becomes the sole and unique confirmation of the subject’s existence. Fear thus becomes the only ephemeral glimpse of the subject’s denied subjectivity.

The process of becoming

We have thus far explored the effects of revolution as a violent and shattering force that creates fragmented beings who lack the ability to fashion a coherent ontology. It is now important to consider the significance of this tragic and fragmented being within the philosophical and historical context of the sixties. We will do so by focusing on the concept of representation. Lobato Morchón assertively sustains that one of the fundamental characteristics that Piñera and Triana develop in their dramatic work to its ultimate consequences is the substitution of action by representation (147). The thematic commonality of game in *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos* supports this contention precisely because the characters in these plays, trapped in their whimsical games, turn all action into role-playing. Moreover, and quite interestingly, they overlap three different levels of representation: an actor or actress plays a character who in turn impersonates another character (Triana) or the same character in a fictitious situation (Piñera). Our purpose, then, is to examine the significance of game and role-playing in *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos* in order to account for their relevance within the Cuban context of revolution.

In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga sets out to theorize the cultural value of play in Western society. One of his central arguments is that play has a “significant function” – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at
play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (19). Huizinga’s assertion that play is charged with meaning prompts us to ponder about the meaning of Triana and Piñera’s dramatic games. Huizinga further describes play as a “significant form” that manifests “a certain ‘imagination’ of reality,” which leads him to the proposition that play has an essential archetypal quality (22). Huizinga’s conceptualization enables us to interpret the games in *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos* as meaningful forms created through an imaginative impulse. Nevertheless, these games do not display an archetypal quality, but rather a metaphoric one: Triana and Piñera’s games stand as a substitution for any practice of rule making. This specific metaphoric dimension is highly suggestive, particularly when considered in relation to the historical context of the Cuban revolution.

The establishment of the revolutionary government in Cuba redefined the social and political landscape of the country and through it the stable and objective specificity in relation to which the subject determined or self-construed him or herself. In this sense, the metaphoric quality of the game as a surrogate for rule making speaks about a shifting objective setting in which the subject struggles to rehearse a new ontological narration. The imperative force of new norms implies flux and readjustment that disorient the subject, which in turn can carry serious consequences, like in the case of Triana and Piñera, where the characters cannot develop a firm sense of identity. This leads us to consider the ontological experience of being as a historically determined condition permanently redefined, which explains why for Butler and Foucault subjectivity constitutes a continuous practice of self-writing. The notion of the subject as a dynamic ontological process is an insightful conceptualization that enables us to join the philosophical current that informed Triana and Piñera with their historical context; namely, the
European theories of Existentialism with the actuality of the Cuban revolution. At this point, I wish to show that these two elements do not contradict or exclude one another, as it is commonly sustained, but rather share a similar conceptualization of the subject as a dynamic process of creation.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, the Existentialist thinker Søren Kierkergaard introduces the notion of human existence as a process of becoming in relation to the concept of despair:

Yet every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming, for the self [in potentiality] does not actually exist, it is simply that which ought to come into existence. Insofar, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair. (30)

Kierkergaard develops his theorization through a Christian worldview that posits God as the only salvation from despair, but he is already planting the seed of critical self-questioning that would concern so many Existentialist writers. This is precisely the lens through which Foucault reads Nietzsche’s historical analysis of the formation of the subject in *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *The Gay Science*. In his 1973 lecture “Truth and Juridical Forms,” Foucault states:

Knowledge must struggle against a world without order, without connectedness, without form, without beauty, without wisdom, without harmony, and without law…. There is nothing in knowledge that enables it, by any right whatever, to know this world. It is not natural for nature to be known. Thus, between the instincts and knowledge, one finds not a continuity but, rather, a relation of struggle, domination, servitude, settlement. In the same way, there can be no relation of natural continuity between knowledge and the things that knowledge must know. There can only be a relation of violence, domination, power, and force, a relation of violation. Knowledge can only be a violation of the things
to be known, and not a perception, a recognition, an identification of or with those things.

(9)

For Nietszche, according to Foucault, the world as a chaotic space turns the relationship between knowledge and nature into one of violence. The human being cannot naturally or harmoniously know his or her surroundings, but must instead engage in a power struggle and exercise of domination against that very world that he or she desires to know. From this viewpoint, truth is attainable only at the price of human suffering. Albert Camus further develops this problematic through the important theoretical concept of the absurd. The absurd, in Camus’s work, is the intimate sense of alienation felt by the modern human being when recognizing the gap between the certitude of his or her own existence and the incapacity to know his or her own self. Camus, thus, develops ontological anguish to its ultimate consequences beyond Nietzsche’s contention that knowing the world is based on a violent struggle between consciousness and chaos. In Camus, the human being can never know the world or the body that he or she inhabits because the human being is a stranger to his or her own being.

The Existentialist precept that the human being cannot access an understanding of his or her world and self constitutes a profound ethical and ontological problem in the conceptualization of being as a process of becoming. For Butler, the subject must know his or her surroundings to undergo a process of self-making that will turn him or her into an ethical and accountable being. Similarly, for Foucault, subjectivity is a self-constituting process that requires social and historical understanding. The Existentialist axiom about the subject’s limited intellectual and cognitive capabilities implies a being who cannot successfully engage in the process of becoming; this limited subject becomes instead a fragmented consciousness that designs a thwarted attempt at subjectivity. This condition accurately describes the characters in
La noche de los asesinos and Dos viejos pánicos. Triana and Piñera’s characters are ontologically broken individuals that fail to productively understand their surroundings and develop a coherent narration of self. Furthermore, the randomized space of action they inhabit inscribes them within meaningless cycles of representation that bars any notion of agency or transcendence. In this sense, they constitute paradigmatic dramatizations of the Existential subject.

The understanding of Triana and Piñera’s characters as concrete Existential beings has led many critics to discuss these plays in universal terms. Both plays have been read as comments and explorations of the anguish that pervades modern life and the existential ailments that afflict the modern subject. Furthermore, at the time, Triana and Piñera were censored and marginalized because their plays displayed aesthetic affinities with foreign avant-gardist models. La noche de los asesinos and Dos viejos pánicos were regarded as instances of cultural colonialism; they were denounced for not representing the Cuban reality, not creating true Cuban characters, and not showing the truthful experience of revolutionary man. In short, their apparent universality rendered them incompatible with the revolution. However, such skewed readings and interpretations overlook the relevance of the plays within their temporal socio-political specificity. A more productive way to account for the plays’ affinity with Existentialist thought is to examine how their ontological questions figure within the historical context of the Cuban revolution.

Ernesto Guevara in his important article “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba” (“Socialism and Man in Cuba”), published the same year as Triana’s La noche de los asesinos, attempts to define the individual that participates in the realization and development of socialism. He terms this individual the new man. The new man, he argues, is part of the revolutionary
avant-garde that sacrifices everything for the revolution and leads the masses towards the fundamental revolutionary ambition of seeing man liberated from his current state of alienation. Crucial here is to point out that Guevara’s use of the term alienation is markedly different from its meaning in Existentialist thought. Guevara speaks of alienation as the concrete consequence of capitalist means of production whereby the worker is led to a state of self-estrangement and social isolation that keeps him from fully directing the course of his life and fully experiencing his humanity. Through the actualization of socialism, he contends, the new man will break the chains of alienation and “logrará la total conciencia de su ser social, lo que equivale a su realización plena como criatura humana” (“achieve full conscience of his social being, which constitutes his absolute realization as a human being”) (10). Guevara singles out social consciousness and ontological fulfillment as two of the fundamental characteristics of the new man, which, interestingly, are two essential concerns in Existentialist thought. Moreover, his argumentation ties in with the philosophical discussion of subjectivity as a dynamic process of self-creation.

Guevara’s socialist perspective necessarily conceives of man as a dynamic process. His perception of the human being is a future projection because the new man is an ever-becoming historical subject:

En este nuevo período de construcción del socialismo podemos ver el hombre nuevo naciendo. Su imagen no está todavía acabada; no podría estarlo nunca ya que el proceso marcha paralelo al desarrollo de formas económicas nuevas.

[In this new period of the construction of socialism, we can see the new man being born. His image is not yet complete, it could never be, because the process develops parallel to new economic forms.] (8)
Guevara’s dynamic understanding of the human being posits the new man as a horizon of utopia. This conceptualization agrees with Foucault theorization that the subject is not a defined entity upon which truth happens, but rather a process “that constitutes itself within history and is constantly established and reestablished by history” (2000 3). This leads us to the argument that Guevara’s harsh criticism of writers like Triana and Piñera, who, in their proximity to the theatre of the absurd, were regarded as part of that “arte decadente del siglo XX, donde se transparenta la angustia del hombre enajenado” (“decadent art of the twentieth century, where the anguish of alienated man is revealed”) (13) is essentially an inaccurate judgment. Although Lalo, Cuca, Beba, Tabo, and Tota constitute the antithesis of Guevara’s new man, they dramatize the imminent danger contained in the violence of revolution.

In Taylor’s aforementioned definition of crisis, she describes it as a pivotal point between “death and regeneration” where objective shifts and ruptures bring about “disorientation and loss of identity.” The historical event of a revolution constitutes one of these turning points that may result in personal and ontological destruction or progress and personal regeneration. Guevara optimistically looks at the bright future of personal fulfillment within a just and renewed society, but Triana and Piñera offer a more somber perspective that delves into the personal disruptive effects of historical change where confusion and fear might be temporal symptoms or a crude image of the perils of violence. Historically speaking, there is no way of knowing whether Triana and Piñera’s characters can become Guevara’s new man, but it is paramount to understand that both perspectives are profoundly concerned with the perception of man as a process of becoming. In this sense, Guevara, Triana, and Piñera themselves constitute three historical subjects trying to understand and theorize their own personal value in the midst of the experience of revolution.
Guevara and Foucault’s concordant interpretation of the human being as a process in constant state of flux and transformation that experiences subjectivity as a future or impossible vision, is a notion magnificently explored in *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos*. These plays intertwine existential questions about alienation and ontological meaninglessness with revolutionary ponderings about the historical subject and his or her capacity (or promise) to transcend. Therefore, Triana’s ontologically disoriented characters and Piñera’s terrified ones should be read as polyvalent beings who in their complex patterns of representation explore the tensions, points of convergence, and divergence between the different contexts to which Triana and Piñera responded. Only in this way can we really appreciate how the plays in their dramatic specificity are overlaid by Cuban and foreign aesthetic models and realities, atemporal boredom and historical fear, assiduous role-playing and futile cycles of representation, desire of transcendence and indifference towards repetition. It is through this perspective that *La noche de los asesinos* and *Dos viejos pánicos* become wonderful stages of representation that think through and imagine the subject in his or her local and universal particularities, thus exploring the question of being human through and within the question of being in the revolution.
Chapter 2
Griselda Gambaro’s Early Dramaturgy: Confused Judgment and Crises

Horror is beyond the reach of psychology.

Theodor Adorno

Griselda Gambaro’s early dramaturgy is exceptional in the Argentine theatrical tradition. Her introduction of avant-gardist elements into the Argentine stages in the sixties confronted the audience with unexpected challenges that resulted in a negative appreciation of her plays. In this chapter, I posit that her innovative dramaturgy formally contrasts sociopolitical realities that link the European post-war and post-Holocaust crisis to the turbulent Argentine situation of the fifties and sixties. My contention is that the residual sense of loss contained in her avant-gardist forms conceptually speaks of the Argentine context in sophisticated manners that express a generalized sense of crisis and problematize the reception of cultural production in critical times of social and political unrest.

This chapter centres on Las paredes (The Walls) (1963) and El campo (The Camp) (1967), investigating both plays as dramatic instances that tackle questions about understanding and critical judgment. The analysis develops through an attentive exploration of the manipulative techniques employed by the powerful in these dramatic worlds. In Las paredes, victimization is primarily instituted through the production of doubt as an element that hinders perception. The manipulation of ambiguity ultimately results in the construction of an epistemologically confused character who fails to recognize the danger of his imminent death. In El campo, violence is established through the despotic charade of forced performance where the behaviour of every character is meant to disguise the connoted reality of the dramatic space as a
concentration camp. This perplexing situation produces disoriented beings unaware of their crude and perilous situation. My intention is ultimately to link the fundamentally confused condition of Gambaro’s victimized characters to the contextual dimension and reception of her early dramaturgy. I argue that the characters’ inability to comprehend the imminent dangers that surround them resembles the epistemological confusion experienced by the original audience who deemed Gambaro’s work as foreign and abstract. The experience of Gambaro’s characters describes the audience’s failure to understand the relevance of violence and crisis in relation to their politically unstable setting.

The difficulty of situating Gambaro

In order to critically explore Griselda Gambaro’s early dramaturgy, we must begin by situating the prolific Argentine writer. Gambaro’s literary production covers the genres of novel, short story, and drama, constituting a voluminous literary corpus that spans over more than five decades and presently continues to grow. Her dramaturgical career began in the sixties with Las paredes, but her first play to be performed was El desatino (The Blunder), which was staged in 1965 and is considered the first absurdist play in the history of Argentine theatre.¹ Two important elements in this initial production stand out: first, the fact that it was staged in the Di Tella Institute, and second, the controversy surrounding the play. The Di Tella was a modernizing project founded in 1958 to promote cultural production in Buenos Aires. The generous funding geared toward research and experimentation gave way to an influx of experimental theatrical

¹ Osvaldo Pellettieri designates the opening of El desatino as the inaugural moment of the absurdist trend of the Argentine neo-avant-garde. He names neo-avant-garde the second modernizing period of the Argentine theatre, which he frames between 1960 and 1976. For an extensive discussion on the neo-avant-garde, see his chapter “La neovanguardia” and Beatriz Trastoy’s “El Di Tella y la neovanguardia absurdista” in Historia del teatro argentino en Buenos Aires.
production that eventually contributed to the professionalization of actors and directors in the Argentine theatrical scene. Nonetheless, the avant-gardist tendencies of many of the plays staged in the Di Tella soon began to lend a specific character to the Institute that many associated with frivolity and a consistent lack of social and political commitment. The plays of Gambaro, one of the playwrights most associated with the Di Tella, soon began to be viewed from this perspective. In a 2002 interview, Gambaro described the situation in her own words: “Había muchos componentes políticos en todo esto. El Di Tella era blanco de esa corriente realista muy politizada que pensaba que era un instituto snob, sólo abierto a las experiencias extranjeras. Entonces, de rebote, como yo estrené allí, me aplicaron el mismo mote” (“There were many political components in all of this. The Di Tella was the target of a very politicized realist trend that thought it was a snobby institute open only to foreign experiences. And since I opened there, they put me under the same label”) (Pellettieri 2004 23). The political aspect to which Gambaro refers is directly linked to the controversy that surrounded her play El desatino. In March 1966, the prestigious magazine Teatro XX selected El desatino as the Best Play of a Contemporary Argentine Author for the year of 1965. Immediately after the verdict, two of the editing members resigned, claiming utter disagreement with the magazine’s selection. This instance constituted the highest moment of tension and confrontation between the playwrights associated with the realist trend and those associated with the absurdist one.

The Argentine critic Osvaldo Pellettieri theorizes this confrontation by positing that the theatrical scene of the sixties –specifically from 1965 to 1969– was characterized by the conflict held between the reflexive realists and the neo-avant-garde (2005 336-47). The reflexive realists, he explains, developed a dramaturgy based on the supposition that theatre could not be a transparent vehicle of representation, but that it could, through the playwright’s
conceptualization and mastery, present a situation that would move the audience to notice the social and political reality of the country. On the contrary, the neo-avant-garde did not constitute a homogeneous group of playwrights voicing a determinate understanding or prescription of theatre, but was formed by a diverse group of theatre practitioners markedly influenced by the dramatic forms and theatrical innovations of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Eugène Ionesco. The reflexive realists (those whom Gambaro calls the “ politicized realist trend”) became the judges of the situation. They openly criticized Gambaro and other playwrights for their cosmopolite avant-gardism, which they regarded as the antithesis of true Argentine theatre. As part of this ongoing criticism, in an article published in El Mundo in 1967, Pedro Espinosa advises the audience to ignore all foreign fashion and prejudices and “Piense que la búsqueda de la conciencia nacional libra también su batalla en el escenario” (“Consider that the quest for national consciousness also fights a battle onstage”) (qtd. Pellettieri 2003 36). This insistence on social commitment as the fundamental value of theatre forced Gambaro’s plays to be regarded increasingly as formalist apolitical pieces. This was the critical view that prevailed in the sixties and the lens through which Las paredes and El campo were initially viewed.

Nevertheless, this initial perception of Gambaro’s plays began to transform in subsequent decades. Gambaro moved away from this early avant-gardist phase toward a dramaturgy that was regarded as more overt political. Her dramatic production in the seventies and the eighties increasingly spoke in explicit modes about social and political violence. Although, as we shall see, this was also the fundamental theme of her earlier plays despite the experimental and at times absurdist dramatic forms she employs. Nonetheless, it was the political terror instituted by the military powers during the Dirty War that shed light on Gambaro’s early plays. Audiences and critics together ceased to see her dramaturgical constructions as apolitical absurdist plots, but
rather understand them to be profound revelations about victimization and the atrocious effects of violence and persecution. This renewed perspective soon displaced the tendency to read Gambaro’s plays as Argentine adaptations of the theatre of the absurd or of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty.\(^2\) Gambaro acquired undeniable relevance within the Argentine context and was thus reclaimed as an intrinsically Argentine playwright.

However, the new critical trend that positioned Gambaro’s dramaturgy as Argentine went as far as revoking her relation to European playwrights. Some claimed that her dramaturgy was a development of the Argentine literary traditions of the *sainete* and *grotesco criollo*. These were two popular forms of theatre in the twenties that mixed tragic and comic elements to create distorted and grotesque situations. Their principal themes were related to the harsh lives of European immigrants in the growing city of Buenos Aires. Peter Roster supports this critical perspective contending that although Gambaro employs some dramaturgical elements that can be related to the theatre of the absurd, “hay un eje vital mucho más ligado con el teatro grotesco argentino y cuyas manifestaciones concretas se comunican mediante las relaciones bipolares de bondad-crueldad, víctima-verdugo, opresor-oprimido, las que nacen de circunstancias político-sociales vigentes en Argentina” (“there is a vital core linked much more closely to the Argentine grotesque theatre whose manifestations occur through the bipolar relations of kindness-cruelty, victim-victimizer, and oppressor-oppressed, which spring from relevant sociopolitical circumstances in Argentina”) (61).\(^3\) The conceptualization of Gambaro’s dramatic work strictly in relation to the Argentine theatrical tradition and sociopolitical context contrasts starkly with the initial reception of her early plays as avant-gard pieces. Nevertheless, both critical tendencies

\(^2\) For bibliography that relates Gambaro’s plays to theatre of the absurd, see Holzapfel and Dubatti. For bibliography that relates her work to the theatre of cruelty, see Blüher and Laughlin.

\(^3\) For a similar reading that relates Gambaro’s plays to the *grotesco criollo*, see also Mazziotti and Feitlowitz.
present a similarly limited view that reduces the complexity and conceptual breadth of her
dramatic works. They both attest to the difficulty of situating Gambaro’s dramaturgy in relation
to a specific dramatic tradition, and, more importantly, they attest to the numerous contending
elements and practices that converge in her work.

I propose that a better and more comprehensive way to conceptualize Gambaro’s early
dramatic texts is as open networks in which multiple vectors converge. From this perspective, we
can regard Gambaro’s plays as embodiments of a third space in which different formal and
dramaturgical elements –absurd, Artaudian, grotesque– intertwine. *Las paredes* and *El campo*
critically blur the different aesthetic and social contexts to which they respond so that the local
and the universal repeatedly merge and dislocate. As we have seen, positioned as they are
between European innovation and Argentine tradition, Gambaro’s plays expose both rupture and
continuation with local and foreign models. The concept of third space that Alberto Moreiras
proposes in *Tercer espacio: literatura y duelo en América Latina* constitutes a useful thought
process that illuminates our understanding of Gambaro. As previously discussed in the
introduction, Moreiras theorizes the need for a third space that resists the traditional impulse of
Latin American criticism to either privilege the excessive proximity of Latin American literature
to Eurocentric modernity or its excessive rejection against it. He thus argues for the need of a
third space which recognizes that the dichotomy between imitation and identity –proximity to
Eurocentric logos or its rejection– is already a metropolitan concept determined by the
universalization of the European logos. This third space, then, should be conceived as an
interstitial space between hegemony and the subaltern periphery in that it rejects the dominance
of the metropolitan text and the insistent quest for identitary paradigms. Nevertheless, he
clarifies, it must be aware of the diverse genealogies that it comprises in order to resist the
appropriation of imperial theory while simultaneously safeguarding the will of theory to exercise critical thinking.

My purpose is to show that Gambaro counters the temporal logic of history by merging European and Argentine sociopolitical contexts, making the reception of her plays a challenging and at times disorienting exercise largely determined by the audience’s socio-historical setting. With this purpose, I develop a conscientious reading of *Las paredes* and *El campo* that centers on the questions of critical judgment, perception, and agency. My hope is to examine the way in which the construction of despotic power, victimization, and passivity in these two plays confronts the audience with serious questions about agency and compassion within a determined historical context. It is in this way that we can begin thinking of Gambaro’s plays as a third space: a fundamental space of critical thinking that attests to the multiple genealogies that inform it. We shall begin with *Las paredes*.

“Truth is saved only by comparison”

A young man unexplainably finds himself in a comfortable and almost luxurious room furnished in the style of the 1850s. There is silence. Elegantly dressed and with a bountiful expression, the young man – unnamed, like all the other characters of the play – patiently sits in contrast with the ill-shaven doorman who quietly stands next to him. Suddenly, a horrid scream invades the room; it ends in a suffocated yell. This is the initial scene that the opening stage directions of *Las paredes* describe. The entire dramatic action takes place in this room. The Young Man, ignoring the motive for his detention, patiently waits while the Doorman and his boss, the Functionary, bring him uncertain news and contradicting stories that consistently suggest certain perversity underlying their actions. As time progresses, the room begins to get
smaller. The Young Man complains, but his claims are mockingly dismissed by the Doorman and thus the limits between what is true and what seems to be true begin to blur. However, the Young Man never doubts his prompt liberation despite the recurring horrid screams, and he even continues to obediently partake in the whimsical games of the Doorman and the Functionary. Finally, the Doorman informs the Young Man that the walls of the room will collapse and crush him at midnight. At this point, he Doorman leaves the door open, but the Young Man remains still, stupidly waiting with wide-open eyes.

The notion of passive subjects is one often utilized to describe the characters of Gambaro’s early plays. Susana Tarantuviez argues that the condemnation of individual passivity is one of the central themes in Gambaro’s early dramaturgy. She explains that the passivity of the victims is precisely the element which leads to their annihilation because it enables the actions of the perpetrator to the extent that the victim becomes guilty of his or her own condition (119). The contention that Gambaro creates victimized characters who allow and facilitate oppression initiates an important discussion about the functioning of power. However, it overlooks the fundamental reasons for such a configuration of power. In other words, the characters are rightly seen as enablers of their own oppression, but the conditions that turn them into said passive subjects fail to be adequately examined. This issue is precisely the one that concerns us here and one we can formulate in a simple yet provocative question: why does the Young Man fail to act and save his life? Or, more generally: what concrete conditions corrupt his clear judgment and prevent him from exercising his right of agency?

When the Young Man first finds himself in the mysterious room he has no doubts about the reality that surrounds him: he is a young man with a regular job, he spent the whole day in the countryside, and he now finds himself in an elegant room. However, these are the last
certainties he will ever have. From the first moment he begins to hear the loud and horrid screams that reach his room, an imperceptible sense of doubt begins to infiltrate his being. The Doorman assures him that the screams are not a human voice, but rather the result of an acoustical misperception created by the bad construction of the house. He then adds: “¡Cómo lo engañan sus sentidos!” (“How your senses betray you!”) (10). This seemingly dismissive comment has crucial implications for the Young Man. The Young Man is locked in an unknown space for unknown reasons and in this thoroughly indeterminate situation—in which he has no control over anything—his own body and its cognitive faculties is all he has left. However, if the Doorman’s simple comment carries the slightest trace of veracity, which is to say that if indeed the Young Man’s senses betray him, then, he has nothing left. It is in this wholly vulnerable condition that the Young Man’s autonomy finds itself seriously threatened.

The Young Man’s destabilized sense of autonomy is the perfect setting for the Doorman and the Functionary to begin exerting their cunning power techniques. This characterizes the dramatic action of the first scene. Soon after his arrival, the Young Man explains to the Functionary that some men in the train station apprehended him and he then adds that they appeared to be armed. The Functionary angrily replies that one cannot be led by mere appearances, and the Young Man apologetically claims that his tiredness must have led him to such erroneous assumption. For the spectator, it is clear that through this manipulative tactic the Functionary persuades the Young Man that he was not taken by force, but as a result of his poor judgment and mistaken supposition. The perversity and brilliance of this tactic that disguises an act of force as an act of misperception lies not only in the fact that it divests the perpetrators of their responsibility, but also that it stresses the Young Man’s doubt towards his senses—his innermost faculty to interpret and understand his surroundings. As a consequence, the Young
Man begins to rely on others, and precisely on those who hold him captive, to comprehend his disconcerting situation. The Doorman takes further advantage of the circumstance and recurs to the macabre power of suggestion. He continuously lets seemingly random remarks slip into the dialogue, thus commenting on the last meal of sentenced people and the eccentric desire to shave before execution. These disconnected comments terribly upset the Young Man, who begins to perceive the unnamed horror of his situation. However, the Doorman is masterful in his proceedings and prevents the Young Man from entirely discerning the threshold of terror.

Toward the end of the first act, the Doorman tells the Young Man that his head will be cut off in such a sardonic manner that the Young Man falls into a state of hysterical laughter. Such laughter marks the Young Man’s confusion fueled by the uncertainty of his condition, the doubt about his own capabilities to comprehend the situation, and the strong desire to dismiss his terrible suspicions. Therefore, at the end of the first act, we do not encounter an autonomous human being, but a significantly distraught one deeply affected by epistemological uncertainty. His ability to choose and comprehend has been seriously corroded to the extent that he finds himself in a perverse situation which begins to reveal the nature of his passivity.

As previously mentioned, the setting of the play changes as the dramatic action advances: the Young Man’s room slowly begins to shrink. When the Young Man’s first complains, the Doorman disregards his claim by assuring him that it is simply ridiculous. The problem of course is that the Young Man’s whole situation is increasingly absurd and defies reasonable explanations. As the scene progresses, the Doorman continues to reprimand the Young Man, accusing him of delusional thoughts:

UJIER. (no lo escucha) La soledad crea alucinaciones, no está acostumbrado a estar solo.

JOVEN. ¡No fue por eso! El cuarto…
UJIER. ¡Basta! Le hago una comparación: la oscuridad crea fantasmas, ¿y existen los fantasmas? No, señor. La verdad sólo se salva por las comparaciones. Sus ojos han apreciado mal el tamaño del cuarto. Me ha llamado a mí para comparar nuestras verdades. Y yo le digo, caballero, ¡que está absolutamente equivocado!

JOVEN. ¿Yo? (Mira a su alrededor, vacila) Sería una locura…

UJIER. (contento) ¿No es cierto?

JOVEN. Sin embargo, hubiera apostado…

[DOORMAN. (ignoring him) Loneliness creates illusions, you’re not used to being alone.

YOUNG MAN. It wasn’t that! The room…

DOORMAN. Enough! I’ll make a comparison: darkness creates ghosts, and do ghosts exist? No, sir. Truth is saved only by comparison. Your eyes misperceived the size of the room. You called me to compare our truths, and I tell you, gentleman, that you are absolutely wrong!

YOUNG MAN. Me? (He looks around, hesitates) It would be crazy…

DOORMAN. (content) Wouldn’t it?

YOUNG MAN. And yet, I would have bet…] (31)

The Doorman’s contention that “Truth is saved only by comparison” situates reality within a relative framework in which truth can only be established in relation to others and to other truths. The Young Man is thus divested of all autonomy to create a personal and independent judgment that is legitimized by his own perception and experience. In other words, his worldview and individual certainty is necessarily mediated by others. For the Young Man, this constitutes a tragic situation since his reality is dependent on those who victimize him and therefore all his judgments and interpretations are bound to stratagems purposefully enacted to confuse and
misguide him. In this sense, the Young Man is the victim of an inexorable situation in which his inability to understand his surroundings through his personal means of perception inevitably condemns him to the perversity of his victimizers.

The situation continues to become complicated as the Young Man’s cognitive and perceptive limitations force him into a state of passivity that weakens his agency. This occurs through further manipulative and deceiving stratagems that the Doorman and Functionary utilize to keep disconcerting the Young Man. In the second act, the Functionary announces that he has excellent news, but in reality he simply hands in an ugly doll to the Young Man. The Young Man’s disappointment is matched only by his uncertainty. The Functionary praises the doll as a wonderful work of art, while the Young Man repeatedly stresses that it is his landlady’s ugly doll, which he detested and many times desired to break. The Functionary is outraged that the Young Man would want to break such a beautiful artistic composition, but then suddenly changes his mind and agrees with the Young Man that it is in effect a hideous piece. He immediately orders the Young Man to break it. The Young Man is confused and claims that he cannot break something that he does not own. Moreover, he suddenly ratifies the Functionary’s first argument that one cannot destroy a fine piece of art. The Functionary grows enraged and aggressively orders the Young Man to break it, but the Young Man, disoriented, is ultimately unable to do so. The ridiculous situation shows how doubt and confusion corrupt the Young Man’s judgment to the extent that he cannot decide what course of action to pursue. The Young Man’s inability to act, even at the trivial level of breaking an ugly doll that he clearly disliked and wished to destroy, shows how his autonomy has been crushed by the sinister games of the Doorman and the Functionary. Therefore, toward the end of the second act, the Young Man has turned into a broken man who no longer has the capacity to reason or act in accordance to his
personal means of judgment or perception. In this manner, he has turned into a man bereft of the autonomy of agency.

This broken Young Man is someone who has been divested of his own subjectivity and place in the world. In this sense, his imprisonment within a shrinking room can be read as the exteriorization of his personal condition; the room thus becomes a metaphor for his decreasing autonomy and subjectivity. In other words, space has an ontological value that manifests the diminishing of the Young Man’s being. As the room continues to shrink, the Young Man possesses less certainty about the reality that surrounds him and his ability to comprehend it. When the Doorman finally informs him that the walls will crush him to death, the Young Man is unable to make sense of such words. He refuses to believe them, but since his perception of reality is necessarily determined by the Doorman’s contentions, he finds himself submerged in the doubt of what can and cannot be true:

JOVEN. ¿Verdad? No estamos en un país de locos. El cuarto no se achicó. (Sonríe infantilmente) El vino.

UJIER. Sí, por eso fue.


UJIER. ¡Pero está equivocado, señor! ¡Le mueven el piso!

JOVEN. (rectifica, gritando) ¡Las paredes! ¡Son las paredes! (Helado) No, no. Me está mintiendo.

UJIER. (lo contempla. Después de un silencio, ríe) ¿Por qué no? Le miento, no le miento, ¿qué significa para usted? ¿Es para poner el grito en el cielo?
JOVEN. *(gritando)* ¡Significa mucho: me pone nervioso! ¡Déjeme en paz! ¡Me aturde!
¡Me…!

JOVEN. ¿Por eso miente ahora? ¿Para distraerme, para probarme?
UJIER. Sí.

JOVEN. Estoy en mi sano juicio, no le haré caso.
UJIER. *(ríe)* ¡Me lo temía! “Murió la verdad”.

[YOUNG MAN. Right? We are not in a country of crazy people. The room did not shrink. *(Smiles childishly)* The wine.

DOORMAN. Yes, that was it.

YOUNG MAN. I was confused. Then I stopped counting and the room stopped moving.

No one moves the world. The world is intact, as always.

DOORMAN. But you’re mistaken, sir! They do move the floor!

YOUNG MAN. *(rectifies, yelling)* The walls! It’s the walls! *(Frozen)* No, no. You’re lying to me.

DOORMAN. *(looks at him. Silence, then laughs)* Why not? I lie to you, I don’t lie to you, what does it mean to you? Is it a big deal?

YOUNG MAN. *(yelling)* It means a lot to me! I get nervous! Leave me alone! You confuse me! You…!

YOUNG MAN. Is that why you’re lying now? To confuse me? To provoke me?

DOORMAN. Yes.

YOUNG MAN. I am not out of my mind. I will ignore you.
DOORMAN. (laughs) That’s what I feared! “Truth has died”. ] (56)

The absolute state of uncertainty in which the Young Man finds himself forces him to seek mechanisms of reassurance through which he can persuade himself that the walls are not shrinking and that he is not condemned to death. However, since his perception of reality is constructed in relation to others, he is further disoriented by the Doorman’s contradictory remark that he is and is not lying. The Doorman’s deceitful strategy utterly denies the Young Man access to a stable frame of perception that could help him discern the bearings of his reality. In this sense, the Doorman’s function is one of producing epistemological doubt. The Doorman produces doubt of meaning as such and through this potent mechanism he denies the Young Man the possibility of forming a sound judgment through which he can access understanding of his precarious condition. Therefore, as the Doorman crudely and succinctly puts it: “Truth has died.” The Young Man is lost in a chaotic and threatening world in which his last resource of autonomy is the desperate belief that he has not yet lost his mind. Nonetheless, this is not entirely true because although he is not insane, during the process of victimization he does lose his clear judgment, sense of individuality, autonomous consciousness, space in the world, and agency. Hence, when the Doorman exits the room and leaves the Young Man, the audience is not witnessing a man who chooses to stay there and wait for his death. Instead, the audience is confronted with the brute reality of a torn human being broken into such a state of passivity that the instinctual fear of death cannot be acted on. In the last instance of the dramatic action, the Young Man has nothing left but doubt and uncertainty and this frightening state ultimately denies him the possibility of existence.
Paranoia and the conspiracy of power

The Young Man’s passivity as the result of paralyzing and disorienting power plays constitutes suitable grounds for discussing the notions of conspiracy and paranoia. In a provocative talk given in 2001 in Buenos Aires titled “Teoría del complot” (“Conspiracy Theory”), Ricardo Piglia examines the concept of conspiracy and its political bearings. He argues that there is an intimate link between conspiracy and State because the State announces at its birth the existence of a dangerous and invisible specter that legitimizes the clandestine politics it exercises—secret services, intelligence, tactics of surveillance and control. This close bond between State and conspiracy, he contends, leads to the definition of conspiracy as “un punto de articulación entre prácticas de construcción de realidad alternativas y una manera de descifrar cierto funcionamiento de la política” (“a point of articulation between practices of construction of alternative realities and a way to decode a particular functioning of politics”) (4). Piglia’s characterization of conspiracy reveals an intersection between two contending groups: the conspirators and the State. The conspirators react against the State through insurgent means by constructing “alternative realities” that the State fights by making indiscriminate use of its legitimized power. Therefore, the social and political action of the former is already implied in the social and political action of the latter. Within such reciprocal relation, and despite the disparity of the contending forces, it is safe to state that both sides assertively engage in action. However, the incapacity to act is precisely what characterizes the Young Man in Las paredes. For this reason, we must examine the more intricate modes in which conspiracy is constructed in Gambaro’s play.

In Las paredes the notions of State and conspirators are rearranged into the categories of the Functionary and the Doorman as the victimizers and holders of power, and of the Young
Man as the victim. As we have seen, the Functionary and the Doorman victimize the Young Man to the extent that they destabilize his sense of self. The Young Man is unable to construct a coherent sense of reality through his own senses and perception and therefore relies on the Functionary and the Doorman to do so. In order to confuse the Young Man, the Functionary and the Doorman construct alternative realities that further victimize the Young Man and establish their power. In this sense, they not only constitute the power that legitimately punishes and controls, but also the conspirators who create other versions of truth. The two conniving men provide the Young Man with contradictory information that never creates a comprehensive or integral view of reality. For instance, the Doorman assures the Young Man that the horrid screams he hears are merely products of his own imagination, but the Functionary instead declares that other men scream out of boredom because they are too comfortable in their well-furnished rooms. The contradicting stories taint the Young Man’s judgment and experience with a definitive sense of ambiguity that ends up blurring his own identity. On more than one occasion, the Functionary asks the Young Man what his name is, whether it is Ruperto de Hentzau o Hentcau (supposedly clearing up this misunderstanding would grant him his freedom), but a satisfactory answer is never provided. This dramatic world in which the holders of power produce multiple versions of reality speaks of a conspiracy that usurps the entire scope of action. The Doorman and the Functionary are those who invent and enact the perverse stratagems and those who also interpret them in distinct modes. The Young Man is thus relegated to the space of passivity in which he can only become the one who listens to the different interpretations while simultaneously suffering passivity’s cruel effects. In this position, the Young Man is neither the beholder of power nor the insurgent force that can fight it. Hence, one of the insights revealed
through him are the terrible consequences that occur when legitimate power utilizes harmful and illicit methods to establish control.

In relation to the understanding of conspiracy as a space of usurped action, it is relevant to speak of paranoia as the space of the paralyzed subject. Paranoia is commonly defined as a pathological fear of persecution,\(^4\) but Piglia suggests that paranoia, before becoming a pathological condition, “es una salida a la crisis del sentido” (“is an escape from the crisis of meaning”) (2). Said crisis of meaning—the concrete antithesis of clear understanding—is precisely the condition in which we find the Young Man in the last act when confronted with the news of his death sentence. The Young Man does not feel persecuted because the possibility of punishment or death is unimaginable to him, but he experiences profound anguish when trying to understand why his world has suddenly become an ungraspable reality. From this perspective, his paranoia is a desperate attempt to establish reality, which constitutes a pointless urge to restore his own perception and worldview through the hope that he has not yet lost his mind. In other words, his paranoia constitutes the futile desire to exercise agency. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the Young Man has lost all power of agency, which reiterates that in this dramatic world where legitimized power and conspiracy are exercised by the same individuals, the victim is unavoidably condemned to the negative space of impossible action.

Considering the nature of the relationship between victimizers and victim in *Las paredes*, it is hard to sustain, as Tarantuviez and others critic do, that Gambaro denounces the passivity of the victim. The inert body of the Young Man, bereft of all agency and autonomy, cannot be held responsible for his own demise, but rather visualized as the materialization of the devastating consequences brought about by the unjust infliction of power. On this account, Gambaro’s

\(^4\) The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “a tendency on the part of an individual or group toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others.”
depiction of power echoes an important parable contained in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. In Kafka’s novel, there is a suggestive passage that speaks of a man of the country who comes to ask admittance to the Law, but “Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard” (161). The man incessantly begs the doorkeeper with persuasive words and gifts, all to no avail, since the situation remains unchanged as the years continue to pass. When the man becomes old and is about to die, he asks the doorkeeper why, in so many years, no other being has asked admittance to the Law. The doorkeeper resolutely “roars in his ear: “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it’”’ (162). The countryman’s futile wait and lack of understanding brilliantly illuminates the condition of the Young Man and his relation to the Doorman. The doorkeeper as the concrete marker of the unachievable and elusive quality of the Law mirrors the Doorman as the sign of sinister and intransigent power. Furthermore, the countryman’s inability to surpass the obstacle of the doorkeeper hints at the Young Man’s failure to transcend the doubt that the Doorman instills in his mind. The dialectical relation within Kafka and Gambaro’s couples thus become insightful foci of exploration that comment on victimization as the result of inscrutable power.

Kafka masterfully explores this theme throughout the novel in a way that further elucidates the unfortunate condition of the Young Man. Kafka’s infamous K., the protagonist, and like the Young Man, is the victim of a larger order whose identity and motives he completely ignores. The perplexing situation in which the two characters inexplicably find themselves systematically disarms them of all the personal and cognitive tools that they would need to fight against that mysterious and unnamed power. They cannot act against something that they fail to understand and thus are inevitably bound to the ultimate demand of this power: their own deaths. In the final episode of *The Trial*, K. is taken by two men to the distant place outside the city
where he will be killed. K. walks “in total accord” with them, and when they arrive to their destination and let go of him, he stands “waiting in silence.” When they place him in his final position and take out the butcher’s knife with which he will be killed, K. regards the polite formalities of the act and realizes that he has to take the knife from their hands and cut his own throat. However, he is unable to do so because he still has a vivid desire to live. At this point, the narrator gives us a last insight into K.’s consciousness: “Logic may indeed be unshakeable, but it cannot withstand a man who is determined to live. Where was the judge he had never seen? Where was the High Court he had never reached? He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers” (254). In that final gesture of spreading his hands and fingers, K. expresses his abiding desire to live, but his inability to understand the chain of events that have led him to such unthinkable situation prevents him from escaping the final. Similarly, the Young Man, standing in silence with “los ojos increíbles y estúpidamente abiertos” (“his incredible stupidly wide-opened eyes”), is unable to escape the inexplicable death to which he has been sentenced. Nevertheless, unlike K., his absolute stupor, which entirely overpowers his gestures, movements, and emotions, keeps him from expressing the faintest desire to live.

The similarities between K. and the Young Man enable us to comprehend the absurd lens through which the play’s first staging in 1966 was viewed. Both works construct an enigmatic situation governed by an unnamed power that unjustly sentences an innocent and unknowing man to the penalty of death. This absurd world lacks a definitive and fixed sociopolitical referent, which in Kafka’s case leads to the most varied interpretations, but in Gambaro’s case leads to the initial accusation of having no political commitment. In effect, the avant-gardist traits that Las paredes displays suggest a hermetic world that precludes all understanding: the Young Man does not understand what happens to him and neither do we. However, my
contention is that the absurd world that Gambaro creates is one that must necessarily be understood from a historical perspective. We will begin to explore this critical perspective through Theodor Adorno’s conceptualization of paranoia.

In 1951, shortly after the Second World War, Adorno published *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. The text is a compilation of reflections that discusses on various levels the unprecedented atrocity of the war and its ineffable consequences. The opening epigraph, “Life does not live,” counters the ethical resonance of the title by suggesting the impossibility of living a good life after the horrors of the Holocaust. Adorno includes a reflection titled “The boy from the heath,” which alludes to Friedrich Hebbel’s ballad in which a boy who wakes up from a premonitory dream is relentlessly afflicted by every mishap of which he dreamt. Adorno argues that the things one fears “have an impertinent tendency to come about” for no apparent reason. He then adds that it is as if “Something in reality strikes a chord in paranoid fantasy and is warped by it” (163). The proposition that one somehow transforms one’s own fears into realities leads Adorno to consider paranoia. He argues that there is an embedded structure of paranoia in contemporary society that is manifestly based on violence –“the persecution of all by all.” The entire population, he suggests, perpetually experiences a latent fear of persecution that comes to characterize the configuration of the social landscape. Adorno finalizes his reflection by contending that “Whether exaggerated suspicions are paranoiac or true to reality, a faint private echo of the turmoil of history, can therefore be decided only retrospectively. Horror is beyond the reach of psychology” (164). Adorno’s brilliant insight recognizes that what can seem to be paranoia constitutes a manifestation of a horror that can only be appreciated retrospectively because the horror is so vast and incommensurable that even on a

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5 *Minima Moralia* is an explicit allusion to *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle’s lesser-known treatise on ethics, which discusses the fundamental ethical question of how to achieve *eudaimonia* and excel in leading a good life.
collective level it cannot be perceived. Thus, if we recall Piglia’s understanding of paranoia as an
“escape from the crisis of meaning,” we can contend through Adorno’s argumentation that this
crisis of meaning lies precisely in the inability to perceive and interpret the signs of horror
present in a society’s violent configuration.

Las paredes constitutes such an instance of paranoia. The harsh critique against the first
staging in 1966 centered on the absurdity of the play, failing to recognize that the absurd
situation of the Young Man spoke to tyranny and its ability to victimize in ways that were not
foreign to the country’s social and political situation. Thus, the public, like the Young Man,
remained unaware and unable to comprehend their situation. This means that they could not read
the distressing signs of political violence because they themselves were immersed in a state of
paranoia. The dangers of violence lay hidden within the social fabric in ways that did not register
in most people’s minds, although the signal of fear was already present in the collective
consciousness. In this sense, and relying on Piglia and Adorno, we are led to argue that a
society’s dangerous wanderings escape immediate perception and require serious means of
conceptualization that elucidate them. Gambaro’s early dramaturgy is precisely an example of
such insightful perception.

Overlapping crises

In order to understand the conceptual power of Gambaro’s early plays, it is necessary to
consider the Argentine political context. Fundamental in the country’s political scene is the
figure of Juan Domingo Perón. His three interrupted presidential mandates map the turbulent and
restless character of Argentina’s political development from the mid-forties to the mid-seventies.
In February 1946, Perón won presidential elections and established himself in power with social
justice and economic independence as his two main goals. His popular measures earned him much criticism from the military and upper classes whose interests did not coincide with Perón’s. Opposition was countered with the founding of the Peronist party and the more frequent implementation of “authoritarian measures, such as the expropriation in 1951 of La Prensa, the leading opposition newspaper” (Skidmore, Smith, and Green 260). The severity of the situation manifested in September 1958 when the military’s first serious attempt to overthrow Perón took place. However, Perón easily suppressed the coup and in 1952 he democratically won re-election. The growing discontent of important sectors, which now included the far-left and the church, finally led the army to present Perón with an ultimatum to resign or confront civil war. This time, in September 1955, the Argentine leader was successfully ousted from power.

As Perón flew into exile, the country remained in critical condition showing increasing signs of political and social violence. On the political level, a succession of brief and struggling military mandates marked the governmental instability of Argentina. On the social level, the strong repression against Peronistas –Perón’s disfranchised supporters– lead to the government’s unprecedented uses of force, which in June 1956, resulted in the execution of forty union leaders (Scheina 295). Rodolfo Walsh’s 1957 groundbreaking journalistic novel Operación massacre (Operation Massacre) details this historical instance and the government’s violent means to maintain power. He focuses on the capture and execution of a group of civilians who fall victim to an illegal operation carried out against Peronist insurgency. In the mid-sixties, political violence continued to radicalize after Argentina saw the rise and fall of two democratically elected presidents ousted by the military. At this point, violence started to permeate the social

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6 Eduardo Lonardi became president in September 1955 and was soon overthrown by General Pedro Aramburu in November 1955.
7 Arturo Frondizi, who ruled from 1958 to 1962, and Arturo Umberto Illia, who ruled from 1963 to 1966.
fabric. In 1966, through another military coup, General Juan Carlos Onganía seized power and proclaimed the advent of the “Argentine Revolution.” His aim was to transform society, but at a very high price. Onganía officially initiated his mandate by closing Congress and expelling opponents from universities and other official entities; these acts marked the rise of political violence in the country, which included “clandestine torture and execution by the military government and kidnapping and assassination by the revolutionary left” (Skidmore, Smith, and Green 266). On the one hand, Onganía’s radical tactics outlawed and persecuted extreme nationalists, and, on the other hand, the formation of urban guerrilla movements intensified violent and subversive action. As social chaos worsened, Onganía’s government lost credibility and finally in 1970, sharing the fate of his predecessors, he too was ousted from power. Thus began the seventies, the decade of political terror in Argentine history.

In 1973, Perón returned to Argentina and won elections for the third time, but his mandate was cut short by his death in July 1974. In 1976, the military coup against Perón’s wife and successor initiated the greatly infamous National Reorganization Process. The Process, also known as the Dirty War, lasted seven years and saw a regime of four military leaders that exhausted the country with unparalleled bloodshed, sadistic violence, and brutality. Colin M. MacLachlan describes the severity of the situation:

Not all individuals swept up in the counter terror simply disappeared, but many did—the number can only be estimated. Amnesty International came up with the figure of 20,000 victims; others gave much lower estimates. The Proceso encouraged the belief that virtually every sector of society and the economy had been infiltrated. Paranoia fed on the numbers of victims, innocent or guilty, that went through the system…. An arrest could be followed by a release within hours, days of interrogation, or perhaps torture and
disappearance. Uncertainty created an atmosphere of intimidation that made any type or degree of resistance potentially fatal. (147)

The Dirty War and its tremendous damage exceeded in violence any other historical period of the country. Panic, torture, disappearance, and the uncertainty of loss, all epitomize the political terror and social horror that Argentina endured during the Process. Nevertheless, a careful study of Argentine history posits moderate social and political violence as a constant and underlying element of the country’s turbulent history. The many military coups and radical seizures of power describe a frail a society whose stability and political participation was constantly menaced and overlooked. Gambaro created dramatic worlds that structurally and psychologically delve into the issues of violence and victimization in modes that relate to the country’s sociopolitical circumstance during the fifties and sixties. For this reason, we can look at her early texts and contend that they in effect harbor ominous insights into Argentina’s dangerous wanderings. It is in this sense that we can assert that Gambaro’s early dramaturgy speaks to the signs of violence in Argentine society by imagining the damaging effects of tyrannical power.

Notwithstanding, the contention that her absurd dramatic worlds shed light on the national situation forces us to consider the significance of the much reproached avant-gardist traits and absurd elements present in her works. Traditionally, these have been considered from an aesthetic viewpoint that regards them as instances of dramaturgical experimentation which links Gambaro to the European theatrical scene. Although I agree with this critical view, I would like to suggest that the avant-gardist character of Gambaro’s early plays can also be regarded through a historical lens. On this issue, I return to Adorno. In 1951, the same year that Adorno first published *Minima Moralia*, he also published a controversial article titled “Cultural Criticism and Society.” In this article, Adorno dwells on the lamentable characteristics of a
postwar society that also suffers the effects of its late capitalist configuration. He argues that people and work have been rendered superfluous by the existing relations of production which coincide with the proliferation of a “Neutralized and ready-made” mass culture that subjects art to “the monotonv of supply” (21). For Adorno, culture has become worthless; its reified condition has turned art into a cultural commodity:

Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (34)

In Adorno’s view, the adverse qualities of capitalism are aggravated by the unprecedented horror of war to the extent that poetry is no longer possible. Such a provocative contention earned Adorno much criticism that would force him to revisit and clarify (even modify) his claim. However, in this initial proposition, we find important clues about art and its relationship to devastation that further our understanding of Gambaro.

Adorno’s words must be understood as a critique against a postwar world in which reified art is unable to provide a transcendent experience through which existence can be restored with meaning. The denied possibility of finding meaning is a notion that pervades Adorno’s later texts. In a lecture delivered in 1965, he reiterates “the problem that, on the one hand, any construction of a meaning, however constituted, is forbidden to us, but that, on the other, the task of philosophy is precisely to understand” (2000 114). Philosophy’s obligation to understand

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8 See Kaufman for a detailed and engaging discussion on the controversy that surrounded Adorno’s provocative claim.
positions it in contrast with the critical intelligence immersed in “self-satisfied contemplation” that Adorno denounces in his 1951 article. This suggests that philosophy performs its critical tasks when it engages and thinks its surroundings and not when it remains confined within the boundaries of its own discipline. On this issue, Adorno emphatically argues that historical elements have paramount effects on metaphysics and metaphysical experience since “situation affects not only metaphysical thought but… [also] the content of metaphysics itself” (2000 105). This proposition illuminates Adorno’s assertion that the Holocaust emptied metaphysics of its affirmative character showing that it was Auschwitz’s horror that rendered barbaric the possibility to live rightly a “damaged life.” Therefore, following his argument that the war permanently changed metaphysics, we cannot regard the ontological preoccupations of Adorno and his contemporaries as abstract and universal reflections about existence, but must recognize them as arduous attempts to understand the existential bearings of the human condition after the devastation of the war. Adorno validates this argument in the aforementioned 1965 lecture when he revisits his initial assertion of the possibility of writing poetry after the Holocaust and reformulates his claim in metaphysical terms; he states that the real question is “whether one can live after Auschwitz” (110). Such a boundless question is one of Adorno’s most urgent and critical ones in his ethical thinking and personal experience.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that on the other side of the Atlantic, Adorno’s preoccupations did not seem to resonate. Gambaro’s sordid dramatic worlds, in which the characters are unable to find or create meaning and affirmatively assert their existence, were regarded as examples of a disengaged dramaturgy that expressed no regard for the immediate social concerns of its contemporary society. However, as Adorno assertively points out, such

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9 I am not suggesting a direct response to Adorno, but rather a generalized concern with respect to the European postwar crisis. In fact, Adorno’s texts on the Holocaust only began to be fragmentarily translated into English in the mid-seventies and more systematically in the eighties.
ontological questions about meaning and transcendence are profound reflections on defined historical situations. For this reason, he considers Beckett’s dramatic works the only relevant metaphysical production after the war.\textsuperscript{10} The principal mistake in regarding Gambaro’s dramaturgical proximity to the theatre of the absurd as mere formalist fascination with foreign models is that it overlooks the meanings embedded within these forms. These forms are filled with ontological and existential questions formulated within the historical, social, and metaphysical crisis that Adorno discusses. Hence, Gambaro’s use of these avant-gardist elements and techniques dialectically constructs themes such as violence in complex modes that link the country’s sociopolitical crisis with a remaining stratum of devastation rooted in the European psyche. In this sense, we can see how in Gambaro’s early dramatic constructions there is a latent tension between the ontological preoccupations of a devastated postwar and late-capitalist society and the risks of a politically unstable nation. This overlap of multiple political and socio-historical crises synthesized within particular theatrical forms constitutes the fundamental characteristic of Gambaro’s early dramaturgy. It is thus clear that Gambaro’s early dramatic texts constitute embodiments of a third space in which multiple and varying aesthetic, historical, social, political, and philosophical contexts critically and conscientiously converge and interact.

The terror of \textit{El campo}

We have conceptualized Gambaro’s early plays as aesthetic instances of paranoia that overlap two dissimilar and divergent crises within their dramaturgical configuration. This will be the lens through which we will read \textit{El campo}. This play is the story of Martin, a passive subject caught within this intricate world. Martin is an unfortunate bookkeeper who inadvertently enters

\textsuperscript{10} See his article “Trying to Understand Endgame,” first published in 1961 in \textit{Notes to Literature}.
a concentration camp. He has been hired by Franco, the director of the camp, as a bookkeeper, but Martin is never asked to perform his duties. Instead, he is exposed to increasingly anomalous situations that begin to persuade him of the reality of the place. Soon after his arrival, Martin is forced by Franco to establish a relationship with Emma, a deeply distraught prisoner whom Franco cruelly and deceivingly treats as one of his dearest friends. A crucial characteristic of the camp is that it is never referred to or denoted as one; nonetheless, it is filled with diverse significant elements—the name Franco, his SS military uniform, and the smell of burning flesh, among others—that function as connotative signs that imply its true identity. Consequently, Martin’s dramatic development is an act of interpretation. His experience in the camp is increasingly the exercise of reading the diverse connotative signs he perceives, including Emma’s erratic behavior, which leads him to the realization that he is in effect in a concentration camp. Martin’s progressive understanding, however, is persistently hindered by Franco’s masking of the camp. Franco employs cruel and misleading strategies that maintain his despotic power while shattering the ontological integrity of the prisoners. Toward the end of the play, Martin is allowed to leave the camp with Emma, but they are soon apprehended by Franco’s functionaries in Martin’s apartment. El campo concludes when Martin finally realizes—as a tragic hero who moves from absolute ignorance to horrid recognition—that he too is a prisoner and that the camp is an inescapable reality.

Franco’s camp as an entity posterior to the Second World War suggests the generalized notion of concentration camps determined by the historical specificity of the Holocaust. Early in the first scene, Martin looks at Franco’s military uniform and recalls seeing some pictures of

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11 The English playwright Sarah Kane in Cleansed (1998), a drastically different yet relevant play, depicts a similar situation in which the concentration camp is persistently implied and connoted as the space of action, but also systematically eluded and prevented from concretizing through dramatic mechanisms.
children having to leave their homes with their schoolbags. Upon hearing this remembrance, Franco interrupts him furiously, throws his SS jacket on the floor, kicks it, and complains about the fact that “todos empiezan a hacer alusiones” (“everyone begins to make allusions”) (168). Franco’s bizarre remark denotes his disgust against the association of his Gestapo jacket and the Holocaust. He repeatedly assures that there is no such relationship, but Martin’s experience in the camp increasingly becomes the interpretation of space and action through his historical knowledge and awareness of the Nazi concentration camps. Therefore, the camp that he comes to ‘see’ and the one that the spectator imagines surpasses the physical limits of Franco’s camp and becomes a highly constructed image mediated by generalized notions of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, despite Martin’s awareness of the SS uniform and other telling details, he never considers the possibility of actually being a victim trapped in a concentration camp. This means that his failure to regard the relevance of past historical experience to his own present existence prevents him from imagining that he can share the same fate and suffering as other victims. Such failure situates him in a position of epistemological blindness that negates him the clarity to escape Franco’s power. My analysis will focus on Franco’s deceiving and sophisticated power mechanisms in order to understand how the dehumanizing configuration of the camp obscures Martin’s perception and precludes him from recognizing the severity of his circumstance.

Franco particularly dislikes the logical association between his camp and the Nazi concentration camps because he seems to be persistently trying to mask the crude reality of the camp he governs. He does so through sophisticated brutalizing techniques that establish a permanent breach between the latent reality of things and its denoted appearance. This becomes evident as soon as he walks into the first scene. Franco enters wearing his immaculate SS uniform while smiling with his “rostro casi bondadoso” (“almost bountiful face”) (162). This
initial instance of semantic incongruity where contending signs point to different meanings characterizes the entire development of the first scene. As the scene progresses, Martin hears working men chanting outside and asks Franco if he can approach the window to take a look at them. Franco hesitates only to then permit Martin to do so, but strangely, when Martin looks out the window, there is no one to be seen out in the fields. The lack of correspondence between the denoted signifier of the voices and the missing signified of the working men confuse Martin and begin to alert him about the strangeness of the place. Martin grows increasingly wary of his surroundings as he notices the conspicuous inconsistencies between the things that he hears and smells, but which he is prevented from witnessing and confirming. This leads him to think of the camp as a dubious world determined by the uncanny characteristic of resembling a Nazi concentration camp.

Nevertheless, Franco’s behavior makes ridiculous the assumption that such an assumption could be true. On all accounts, Franco appears to be a mildly unstable and eccentric man. He justifies his choice of uniform as a question of taste, a mere “harmless habit,” that loses its threatening quality with Franco’s kind and strange manners. Franco expresses his disgust for people’s habit of chewing gum, takes off his boots and socks and waves his feet in front of Martin’s face, and then fails to coherently follow any conversational thread. His many unrelated questions and topics upset Martin to the point of annoyance, which lead Martin to regard Franco not as a menacing figure, but merely as a vexing one. This manages to overcome any of his doubts or concerns about the peculiarity of the place and sets the basis for his altered perception that confounds the reality of things with their enacted appearance.

Within this dangerously confused frame of mind, Franco further tests Martin by persuading him to meet Emma, presumably one of his dearest childhood friends. However, the
stage directions that describe Emma’s forced appearance – she is pushed from the outside onto the scene – evidence the deceitfulness of Franco’s words:

…Se queda inmóvil, con un aspecto entre asustado y defensivo, al lado de la puerta. Es una mujer joven, con la cabeza rapada. Viste un camisón de burda tela gris. Tiene una herida violácea en la palma de la mano derecha. Está descalza… Hace un visible esfuerzo, como si empezara a actuar, y avanza con un ademán de bienvenida. Sus gestos no concuerdan para nada con su aspecto. Son los gestos, actitudes, de una mujer que luciera un vestido de fiesta.

[…She remains still, next to the door, appearing afraid or defensive. She is a young woman with a clean-shaven head. She is wearing a large grey shirt made out of coarse cloth. She has a violet wound in the palm of her right hand. She is barefoot… She makes a visible effort, as if she were beginning to act, and she advances with a welcoming gesture. Her gestures do not match her appearance at all. Her gestures and behavior belong to a woman wearing a cocktail gown.] (173)

Martin is utterly baffled by Emma’s deplorable appearance. He stammers – “como si masticara las palabras” (“as if he were chewing his words”) (174) – unable to speak or behave normally around her. This initial shock blocks his judgment, but then slowly gives way to his imminent realization. Meanwhile, Emma, following Franco’s orders, insistently (and sadly) attempts to seduce Martin, coming to a point where she lifts her shirt and shows him her legs:

MARTIN. (le baja la falda) ¿Qué hace? Quédese tranquila. Me muestra las piernas y parece escapada de … (se detiene atónito, como si sólo en ese momento se diera cuenta de que ella parece escapada de un campo de concentración).
[MARTIN. (puts her skirt down) What are you doing? Stay still. You show me your legs and you look like you escaped from… (he stops in astonishment as if he just came to the realization that she looks like she has escaped from a concentration camp.))]

This moment of lucidity is crucial because it is the first concrete instance in which Martin truly realizes that he is in a concentration camp. It is at this instance that Franco’s name, uniform, and whip, along with the mysterious chanting of men, suddenly add up in Martin’s head as the definitive markers that confirm his horrid suspicion.

Nevertheless, Martin’s sudden realization is a passing instance of clarity that does not prompt him to leave the camp or get noticeably alarmed about the situation. The reason behind this is Franco’s elaborate machinations of power that persistently confuse Martin and disorient his initial concern. These power schemes are largely based on his fascination with theatricality. As we saw in the first scene, Franco enacts a small performance of an eccentric character to obscure Martin’s perception. As the dramatic action progresses, Franco continues to mask the reality of the camp by demanding collective acts of performance from both guards and prisoners. This vile stratagem finds its maximum expression in the third scene of the first act in which Emma performs a grotesque piano recital under Franco’s orders. The whole scene is saturated with artificiality. Emma enters wearing a ridiculous wig, receives a bouquet of artificial flowers from Franco, and sits in front of a broken piano. She exaggerates her gestures faking nervousness, excitement, and gratitude toward her bizarrely behaving audience comprised by other prisoners and a group of Gestapo guards. The scene functions as a collective performative space in which all the characters destabilize their categorical identities. The prisoners behave in a disorderly fashion like children cheering emphatically for Emma and asking for more music. The
guards attempt to keep order oscillating between threatening and kind figures who execute their duties “casi tiernamente, sin violencia” (“almost tenderly, without violence”) (191), and Franco pretends to act as a charming host. The scene escalates in absurdity and intensity until it becomes a sordid charade of empty forms that instead of hiding an atrocious reality ends up revealing a horrific one. It finally concludes with Martin’s emotional breakdown that leaves him beaten, crying, lying on the floor, unable to resist the farce, and assuring a similarly destroyed Emma – who is curled up in corner crying like a little girl: “Me divertí… mucho… mucho… mucho…” (“I very… very… very much enjoyed it”) (196).

For the spectator, it is evident that this emotionally broken Martin who lies crying on the floor is now another one of Franco’s victims. Martin, like all the other prisoners, partakes in the grotesque charade congratulating Emma for her success while physically and emotionally expressing the vivid pain inflicted by Franco’s theatrical game. Nevertheless, in the subsequent scene, Martin appears to have recovered his usual disposition and continues to act as the bookkeeper who, far from being a prisoner, can freely leave the camp by his own will. The question, though, is what precisely legitimates this thought in Martin’s head? In her discussion of Gambaro’s early plays, Diana Taylor contends that “the theatricality itself makes the entire scenario possible by signaling to the victims that the visible threat is not ‘real’ ” (101). Following Taylor’s proposition, we can in fact sustain that Martin is fooled by Franco’s theatrical games taking them as nonsensical charades that have no true correlation with his personal situation and thus pose no real threat to his being. However, I believe that the inherent damage contained in Franco’s theatrical stratagems is not only the ability to disorient Martin, but also, and more importantly, the power to prevent Martin from relating to the others prisoners, in particular to
Emma. A discussion on compassion will reveal why Martin’s inability to truly sympathize with Emma ultimately precludes him from recognizing himself as another victim of Franco.

Aristotle defines compassion as a “feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon” (1385b2). Based on this definition, Martha Nussbaum posits that there are three cognitive requirements for the feeling of compassion to arise (306-323). The first one is the belief that the witnessed evil is serious and not trivial. Aristotle specifies that painful and serious evils include “death in its various forms, bodily injuries and afflictions, old age, diseases, [and] lack of food” (1386a9). The second cognitive requirement is the belief that the person’s suffering is undeserved. This condition is fundamental in Aristotle’s conception of tragedy because in his view we can only pity those who have been unjustly punished, or as George Steiner puts it, “punished far in excess of [their] guilt” (9). Finally, the third requirement is that the person who feels the emotion believe that a similar evil could befall him or her. On this issue, Aristotle points out that “In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours” (1385b2).

We now need to consider the extent to which these cognitive requirements are met in El campo. In the early scene in which Martin meets Emma, Martin’s manifest shock and unsettled demeanour imply his genuine belief that Emma’s psychological distress and physical afflictions are serious and not trivial. Moreover, his realization that she seems to have escaped from a concentration camp suggests that he considers her an unfortunate victim whose suffering could

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12 Aristotle’s translations employ the word ‘pity’ instead of ‘compassion,’ but I purposefully use ‘compassion’ because of the negative and condescending meanings that we presently attribute to the emotion of pity. Aristotle used interchangeably the Greek tragic terms eleos and oiktos, which did not possess the negative semantic association of our modern understanding of ‘pity’ (Nussbaum 301).
not have been deserved. These two considerations lead me to argue that Martin could be inclined to feel compassion for Emma, but his inability to engage with the third cognitive requirement thwarts this possibility. Aristotle’s asserts that pity is bound to the recognition that a similar suffering to the one we witness can befall us. He thus foregrounds the need for similar possibilities to be shared between the beholder of suffering and the sufferer and asserts that “what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others” (1386a13). Martin, however, never fears or considers the possibility that Emma’s fate and misfortunes can befall him. Throughout the dramatic action, he physically distances himself from Emma’s emaciated body and repeatedly looks down at her deranged and erratic ways. The physical and psychological distance that he perceives between Emma and himself prevents him from seeing any possible resemblance between his position and that of the prisoners’. The terrible consequence is not only his failure to recognize his intrinsic weakness and vulnerability, but also his inability to see that he is already a victim of Franco and part of his concentration camp.

Going back to the crude scene of the piano recital, we must examine in detail the precise violence that emerges from Franco’s charades. Franco brings to life his delusional fantasies by ordering every individual to behave in a particular and determinate way. He thus organizes all the characters into prescribed spaces of performance that deny them an inherent sense of agency. Simply put, the characters’ actions are incongruous with their own desires, emotions, and notion of purposefulness. In this sense, every single participant of the charade is rendered as a compound of contradictory actions, desires, emotions, perceptions, gestures, and intentions that manifestly speak of ontological shattering: the cruel roles that they are permanently forced to

13 Fear and pity are central to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. In the Poetics he argues that fear and pity are elicited by the tragic conflict and subsequently purged through its resolution. Furthermore, he maintains that we relate to the tragic hero because we pity his underserved misfortune and simultaneously fear “the misfortune of a man like ourselves” (23).
perform rob them of their agency and autonomy. The true atrocity that emerges from the camp, then, is the fact that Franco’s forced performances constitute violent acts of disjuncture that deny the prisoners their autonomy and sense of self, and ultimately turn existence into mere simulacrum. This tragic condition is epitomized in the character of Emma. The stage directions that first describe her already denote the irreconcilable gap between her behavior and real situation. Emma is constantly trying to replace reality with imagined narratives that may justify her wounds, her baldness, the number tattooed in her arm, and all the bodily marks that denote her as a prisoner. Nevertheless, her desperate imaginings of herself as a glamorous woman repeatedly devolve into grotesque and pathetic performances that show the profound disarticulation of her own being. This torn condition is the element that underscores her seductive gestures directed at Martin and ultimately the fundamental aspect that distances him and disables his feeling of compassion.

Emma’s continuous attempts to seduce Martin are dramatic moments of emotional intensity that persistently destabilize him. Martin genuinely feels sympathy toward Emma, but every caring gesture or caress that he tries to exercise is falsely perceived by Emma as a flirtatious or insinuating move:

EMMA. (… Martín se acerca, va a tocarla con un gesto de piedad, pero
imprevistamente ella levanta la cabeza y sonríe con satisfecha coquetería) ¿Qué pretendía?

MARTÍN. (alejándose) Nada.

EMMA. (sonríe) Todos dicen lo mismo. Pero apenas una se descuida, se abalanzan.
[EMMA. (… Martin approaches her, he is about to touch her with a gesture of compassion,\textsuperscript{14} but she unexpectedly lifts her head and smiles flirtatiously) What were you trying to do?

MARTÍN. (moving away) Nothing.

EMMA. (smiles) They all say the same thing, but as soon as one looks away, they pounce on you.] (175)

The fact that Martin’s caring gestures are read repeatedly as indecent advances upsets Martin and prompts him instead to manifest the repulsion that Emma’s constant scratching, baldness, and wounds produce in him. Martin thus proceeds to push her away and at times even makes evident his “involuntary disgust” (177). Nussbaum argues that the “movement of imagination that might lead to compassion can be blocked in several ways,” and she posits disgust as one of these ways (342). In effect, Martin’s disgust toward Emma impairs their mutual closeness. However, it is the tension between his repulsion against her body and his simultaneous concern for her condition that prevents him from assertively relating to her. In other words, Martin cannot relate to Emma as an integral human being. Her torn condition prevents him from developing consistent emotional mechanisms through which he can genuinely and sustainably maintain a feeling of compassion toward her. Moreover, the dislocated condition that she reiteratively displays under Franco’s orders keep persuading Martin –who still maintains his own sense of autonomy– that there is nothing shared between them and thus her fate, suffering, and pain could never constitute his own. Franco’s power is therefore not merely contained in the semblance of theatricality, but in the shattering ontological effects of theatricality. His camp as a space of forced performance prevents both guards and prisoners from developing a sustained notion of autonomy and integral

\textsuperscript{14} The word “piedad” is most commonly translated as “mercy,” but in this context it seems appropriate to use “compassion,” which is the third definitions given by the \textit{Diccionario de la real academia española}: “Lástima, misericordia, conmiseración.”
sense of being through which they can coherently behave and relate to others in significant and meaningful modes. This imposed atomization of the characters denies a sense of solidarity, understanding, and perceived sameness that ultimately annihilates a shared notion of humanity. It is in this way that Franco’s conniving stratagems hinder Martin’s ability to feel compassion toward Emma and impair his capability to see in her his own victimization.

The closing scene of *El campo* is the dramatic instance in which Martin finally realizes the fallacy of his presumed ontological distance from Emma and comes to the recognition of his own tragic fate. Toward the end of the play, Martin informs Franco that he can no longer stand the camp and will thus leave immediately. Franco asks Martin to take Emma with him and Martin gladly accepts thinking that he will be able to liberate her. However, quite to the contrary, this turns out to be precisely the strategy through which Franco finally apprehends Martin and turns him into a prisoner. It is at this point that Martin’s entire worldview breaks. Martin comes to the tragic recognition that he is not inherently different from Emma and her pain and misery now constitute his own pain and misery. Furthermore, this paramount instance of clarity reveals to him that he was a prisoner from the moment he accepted the job. Martin, thus, finally recognizes the camp as an imminent space of terror that contains all meaning, emotion, possibility of action, and experience. The tragic element, however, is that this recognition (as tragic knowledge usually tends to do) comes too late and Martin knows that no possible action could save him at this point. He thus remains “aletargado, vencido” (“lethargic, beaten”) while Franco’s functionaries inject him and brand him with a burning iron.
Challenges of perception

In his excellent book *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams argues emphatically for the relevance of tragedy in the twentieth century, shifting the focus of the tragic from the individual to the collective realm of action. On this regard, he contends that “We think of tragedy as what happens to the hero, but the ordinary tragic action is what happens through the hero” (55). Following Williams’ argumentation, we can examine Martin’s genuine dramaturgical value. Martin, as the tragic figure, undergoes the ontological journey from epistemological blindness to tragic recognition through his painful process of victimization. However, following Williams’ contention, the tragedy of *El campo* is not what happens to Martin, but what happens through him. What happens through Martin is the audience’s social experience of crisis. Martin, unlike all the other characters, enters the camp unknowingly and is there to witness all of Franco’s orchestrated performances. His particular condition situates him in the position of spectator within the play. This shared experience of spectatorship between Martin and the audience is the fundamental element that enables our understanding of *El campo* as a formal conceptualization of a general sense of crisis.

Williams posits revolution as the essential tragedy of the twentieth century because it describes our times’ experience of social crisis. He argues that the witnessing of suffering –“war, famine, work, traffic, politics” (49)– prompts the subject to engage in action and experience chaos and evil towards the attainment of tragic knowledge. The tragic knowledge of revolution, he clarifies, is the understanding of new relations, the development of new structures of feeling that enable the subject to see others in his or her same quality as human beings. Suffering’s ability to produce compassion (one of tragic theory’s central preoccupations) reveals the collective dimension of tragedy. Moreover, it reiterates William’s understanding of tragedy as a
collective experience that bestows transcendent meaning upon shared instances of suffering that are particular to our modern social environment. My interest in comparing Martin’s and the audience’s experiences through the lens of social crisis seeks to reveal Gambaro’s early dramaturgy as a complex interaction of local and foreign experiences of crisis synthesized in avant-gardist forms that precluded the audience from collective understanding or action.

As previously noted, Martin’s experience within the camp is an act of interpretation largely informed by his knowledge and awareness of the Holocaust. This practice of reading also describes the approach of the audience toward Gambaro’s play. The regular audience member of the sixties would have been familiar with the situation of Nazi Germany, in particular because of the prominent wave of European immigrants that the country received during and after the Second World War. However, the awareness of this past historical catastrophe was not relevant nor did it awaken interest in the audience. It is in this respect that the audience parallels Martin’s experience of perception. Martin, despite suspecting the fact that he is in a concentration camp, never imagines that he could become a prisoner. He fails to genuinely connect with Emma and see in her misery the semblance of his own future suffering. This inability to recognize his vulnerability leads him on a path of epistemological blindness that prevents him from truly comprehending his own condition. Similarly, El campo’s initial spectators distanced themselves from the pathos of the dramatic action, judging it as alien and foreign to their experience. There was a failure to perceive the relevance of the play’s shattering violence within the country’s growing instability. Furthermore, a general interpretative tendency reiterated the notion that Gambaro implemented foreign forms to speak of foreign subjects. This ongoing prejudice continued to misjudge the absurdist and avant-gardist elements of her plays as empty abstract forms that did not already constitute aesthetic configurations of an ontological crisis.
On this issue, I would like to expand on the argument that Gambaro’s early dramaturgy’s innovative forms link different experience of crisis. *El campo*’s use of fascist elements, such as Franco’s name, his SS uniform, and the concentration camp, displays an explicit interaction with the Holocaust. However, this interaction goes beyond a historical reference. Through the dramatic exploration of the Young Man’s and Franco’s prisoner’s suffering, Gambaro examines the damaging powers of violence and through it comments on the social and ontological crisis of Auschwitz. This crisis, which Adorno poignantly voices as the question of whether one can live after the Holocaust, results from the devastating experience of Auschwitz, but must also be recognized as a larger crisis that is particular to the West in the modern era.

In his influential work *Tragedy is not Enough*, Karl Jaspers debates the ethical and experiential value of tragedy in the midst of the Nazi regime. He situates the tragic conflict at the core of an irreducible contradiction between man’s desire to apprehend reality and his incapacity to do so. Truth forever escapes us, he dictates. Jaspers’ premise advances the urgent Existentialist debate about the human being’s intrinsic inability to understand his or her reality. Joseph Krutch and Albert Camus are two important voices in this debate. In his 1929 *The Modern Temper*, Krutch posits that the paradox of humanism is the desire to attain the utopian ideals of equality, justice, and collective wellbeing through a determinately individualistic humanism that precludes that which it seeks to achieve. Camus radicalizes Krutch’s argument and develops ontological anguish to the ultimate consequences of the absurd. The absurd, he maintains, is the intimate sense of alienation felt by the modern human being when recognizing the gap between the certitude of his or her own existence and the incapacity to know his or her own self. At the core of this Existential debate, there is an essential critique against rationalism and its positing of reason as the fundamental source of human knowledge. Tragic knowledge –
which springs from the experience of suffering—stands as the antinomy of scientific discourse and thus points to the generalized crisis of modern times. The modern consciousness is governed by rational principles of scientific and technological progress that advance the human being’s understanding and control of the world, and yet, as Williams brilliantly notes, there is no coherent structure of feeling or set of beliefs that can attribute transcendent meaning to the twentieth century’s unprecedented wars, devastation, and levels of bloodshed. In this sense, this profound crisis displays a general sense of discontent towards modernity, but also importantly responds to the Holocaust and the Second World War’s incommensurable experience of violence.

Gambaro’s use of a fascist setting in *El campo* surprised audiences as a foreign choice that referred to an alien reality. However, her deliberate reference to the Holocaust engages with the broader crisis of modernity that exceeds the historical specificity of Auschwitz. Gambaro’s careful examination of power and its victimizing techniques, particularly through the characters of the Young Man and Emma, display an acute preoccupation with violence and its damaging effects. The Young Man’s Kafkaesque plight and Emma’s torn humanity speak to epistemological doubt and the subject’s inability to comprehend and successfully act within his or her surroundings. Moreover, the Young Man’s failure to rely on his own judgment and perception indicate a cognitive failure to produce an objective realm of truth. Gambaro thus dramatizes Jaspers view that truth forever escapes us by creating a relative and elusive sense of truth, which, as the Doorman forewarns the Young Man, “is saved only by comparison.” But Gambaro’s exploration of ontological angst and crisis transcends its original European context and becomes urgently relevant within the Argentine context and its developing sociopolitical crisis. The generalized, albeit subtle, signs of political violence and social unrest that ailed the
country through its many military coups and transitional governments were not alien to
Gambaro’s violent dramatic examinations. On the contrary, her interest in tyrannical power,
passivity and the usurped scope of action, the destruction of autonomy, and the shattering effects
of violence all spoke to the country’s turbulent history. In the fifties, political violence intensified
with the disfranchisement of political groups and execution of union leaders, and in the sixties,
with the emergence of urban guerrilla movements and military clandestine torture. Gambaro’s
work thus reveals the intensification of violence and its dangerous consequences. Hence, it is
almost as if her early dramatic works anticipate the waves of political violence and generalized
terror that afflicted the country in the seventies during the infamous Dirty War.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that Gambaro’s early dramaturgy overlaps
different experiences of crisis that respond to markedly different political and socio-historical
contexts. The general preoccupations and discontents of modernity simultaneously inform an
understanding of the risks of the growing social violence in Argentina and reflect on loss and the
devastation of war and the Holocaust. This complex interaction of crises constructs complex and
polyvalent dramatic worlds that escape univocal and simple readings. The sophisticated character
of Gambaro’s early plays calls into question the common critical assumption that her works can
be regarded as means of empowering the audience. Katherine Ford argues that Gambaro, among
other Latin American playwrights, used violence onstage as a form of protest that would
illuminate the forms of violence that governments were inflicting on their populations. In this
respect, she writes that “By taking control of the violence that was being manipulated offstage to
provoke fear and paralysis, the playwrights and the theatre community as a whole aimed to
unmask these machinations and empower their audiences” (2). Although this contention can be
validated from our contemporary viewpoint, it is problematic to attribute this purpose to
Gambaro when considering the reception of her early plays in their immediate historical context. The audiences of the sixties harshly criticized Gambaro for producing avant-gardist plays that lacked relevance or engagement with the local context. Therefore, Ford’s assumption of empowerment is one that finds no resonance within Gambaro’s early dramaturgy. In this respect, I consider that it is necessary for a contextualized reading of Gambaro to put forth the idea that despite the signs of terror and abuse that we so readily identify in our current readings, the juxtaposing character of Gambaro’s early plays represented a challenge for its contemporary audience.

On this account, I return to Martin’s experience of spectatorship within Franco’s camp. Martin distinguishes himself from Emma and the other prisoners assuming a fundamental distance between them. He thus precludes the tragic knowledge of imagining their suffering as his personal plight and subsequently fails to recognize his own menaced condition. Martin’s error of judgment illuminates the audience’s negative reception in the sixties and their distance from Gambaro’s victimized characters. The spectators failed to see that her powerful dramatizations of suffering and pathos made relevant European experiences of crisis that shed light on their country’s unstable and increasingly violent situation. The audiences thus regarded terror and tyrannical victimization as alien realities that bore no relation to the national context. Gambaro’s early plays thus enact a crisis of meaning that rendered its original audiences as passive and aloof as Martin and the Young Man.

Gambaro’s early plays stand as epitomes of the crisis of meaning and instances of doubt because they juxtapose multiple experiences of crisis that challenge simple interpretations. In other words, they resist being reduced to single socio-historical contexts. Gambaro’s use of innovative and avant-gardist forms links conceptual reflections on tyrannical power, ontological
angst, and violence that relate the general crisis of modern times to the historical specificity of the Second World War and the sociopolitical Argentine crisis. This complex interaction of contexts results in structurally elaborate plays that question a manifest intention to socially and politically empower the audience. On the contrary, Gambaro’s early plays perform radical inquiry through formal and conceptual means that explore and enact instances of crisis. Within this exploration, obscured judgment and perception stand out as imminent dangers of crisis that importantly characterize the audience’s reception in the sixties. Unable to see the relevance of Gambaro’s work, the spectators mimicked Martin’s epistemological blindness as if repeating his tragic path of walking unknowingly into the realm of terror.
Chapter 3
Jorge Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes*: Plurality and the Quest for New Forms

Jorge Díaz is one of the most prolific Chilean playwrights; he wrote more than one hundred plays during his successful career spanning almost four decades. *El cepillo de dientes* (The Toothbrush) (1961), one of his earliest plays, is undeniably his most famous piece and one of the most well known Latin American plays in the world. This chapter posits that *El cepillo de dientes* is a dramaturgical enquiry about the limits of individuality that thinks about formal innovation and theatrical development. In *El cepillo de dientes*, in the intimacy of a conjugal household, Díaz constructs a social environment of a wide array of voices that characterizes the play’s dramatic world. I begin by examining the dramatic dialogue as a hyperbolic imagination of plurality that displays the intrinsic social dimension of human interaction. This reveals the characters as ontologically unstable identities whose individuality is constantly at the verge of annihilation. My intention is to examine the ontological frailty and changeability of the characters as a willed condition to achieve a heightened sense of reality through the game of impersonation. I posit that the characters’ desire to merge with the exuberant space of the dramatic dialogue constitutes an insatiable yearn to perpetually reinvent the form of collectiveness. In other words, the characters’ actions and performance are governed by their unremitting will to reshape the practice of otherness and endlessly submit to the exhilaration of vicarious existence. I therefore contend that their game is an archetypal model of renovation through which *El cepillo de dientes* can be conceptualized as an important moment of dramatic innovation that critically reflects upon the role and state of Chilean theatre during the early sixties. I ultimately wish to propose *El cepillo de dientes* as a paradigmatic play that displays
Díaz’s vehement struggle with the issue of formal and dramaturgical innovation and his relentless desire to take theatrical practice into the radical space of hyperbolized plurality where individual consciousness silences and ceases to exist.

The modernization of Chilean theatre

*El cepillo de dientes* was first performed at the Ictus Theatre in Santiago de Chile in 1961. Díaz published its first version that year and produced a new revised version in 1966. This new version displayed significant changes: the division of the dramatic action into two acts and the added subtitle of “Náufragos en el parque de atracciones” (“Castaways in the Amusement Park.”) The 1966 version became definitive and has been performed innumerable times. It is the one with which we concern ourselves in the present chapter. *El cepillo de dientes* is a play primarily about a game. The players are a middle-aged married couple of unnamed individuals, merely designated as El and Ella. The play begins with a seemingly quotidian breakfast that gradually transforms into a highly sophisticated game. The game develops through a complex and dynamic dialogue saturated with external voices that the characters include through the incessant quotation of mass media – advertisements, magazines, journals, among others – and the frantic impersonation of other beings. These voices shift the characters’ identity and constantly hinder their communication. At the end of the first act, El strangles Ella with a radio cord and informs a third character, Antona, that the corpse is in the usual spot. The second act begins exactly where the first one ends. Antona, who in reality is Ella disguised with an old wig and a cheap dress, enters the scene pretending to be the maid. The unsettling game between the couple continues as El and Antona play out the scene of an unfaithful husband who tries to seduce a naïve maid by quoting incongruent sources and digressing into minimal instances of role-
playing. The humorous game progresses until El and Antona engage in an “especie de absurda lucha amorosa” (“kind of absurd amorous struggle”) in which Ella returns to her original identity (117). The two characters briefly discuss their experience before another chaotic scene of physical violence begins climaxing with Ella’s stabbing of El with a fork. Suddenly, unknown bodies begin to dismantle the stage while the couple complains about not having had enough time to finish the game. The stage is left bare and pitch dark. The couple lights some candles while assuring each other that the next day they will invent another game, another amusement park. Grudgingly, El sits down in an armchair to knit and Ella begins to play the harp.

Unlike in the case of Triana, Piñera, and Gambaro, the contemporary audience of El cepillo de dientes did not regard the avant-gardist and absurdist character of the play as a nonsensical and irrelevant dramatic exercise of foreign imitation. On the contrary, the original audience of the 1961 performance favorably received Díaz’s play. This telling fact is due to the specific configuration and modernization of the Chilean theatrical scene, which we will now examine in detail.

The modernization of Chilean theatre began in the forties in the universities of Santiago with the emergence of various theatre groups that counted on a large student base and some government funding.¹ Among these theatre groups, two played a principal role: the TEUCH (Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile), founded in 1941, and the TEUC (Teatro de Ensayo de la Universidad Católica), founded in 1943.² These groups differed in aesthetic and political vision, but collectively contributed to the consolidation of a stable and productive theatrical scene. They created a professional space for actors, directors, and all types of theatre

¹ The Law of the Protection of the Artist, introduced in 1935, gave tax-exempt status to theatres performing with Chilean actors and/or texts.

² For an informative analysis of the emergence, development, and main characteristics of these groups, see Pradenas (217-28).
makers to innovate and revolutionize theatrical and dramaturgical forms. Among this productive group of theatre makers, a prolific generation of Chilean playwrights emerged and came to occupy a central role. These writers created a vast body of dramatic works that is greatly varied in its themes, preoccupations, aesthetic propositions, and ideological inclinations.

Critics have repeatedly attempted to examine the extensive production of this significant moment of Chilean theatrical development. Despite differences of opinions regarding specific details and propositions, most critics concur that three main tendencies shaped the Chilean theatrical landscape: first, a tendency marked by realist representation primarily led by Egon Wolff; second, a tendency largely governed by social themes and concerns with distinct interest in historical and folklorist elements; and third, an experimental and avant-gardist tendency. Jorge Díaz is consistently regarded as the principal figure of the avant-gardist trend. Moreover, critics commonly view these three tendencies as a persistent professional attempt to create a local theatre in Santiago that had national aspirations. Elena Castedo-Ellerman emphatically supports this view by arguing that the dramatic works and theatrical performances produced between 1955 and 1970 display a constant preoccupation for a certain “chilenidad.” She explains this “chilenidad” as an effort to create a specifically national sense of self-reflection and self-visualization (22). Luis Pradenas further supports this perspective by contending that the Chilean theatre of the time was predominantly geared toward the discovery of a truly Chilean form of expression (217). The common conceptualization of the modernizing process of Chilean theatre, which has been put forth by critics like Castedo-Ellerman and Pradenas regards the realistic trend led by Egon Wolff and the social trend interested in folkloric elements as congruent tendencies that advanced the collective project of national self-expression and self-reflection. However, it does not account for the significance of the avant-gardist tendency within the Chilean

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3 See Pradenas, Castedo-Ellerman and Fernández.
modernizing context. This is clear from Castedo-Ellerman comment that “De todas las corrientes de este periodo, ésta [la vanguardista] es la más universalizante y la que menos contribuyó a ‘la chilenidad’” (“Of all the currents of this period, this [the avant-gardist] was the most universalizing and the one that least contributed to ‘la chilenidad’”) (178). This view is limited because it springs from a thematic approach that fails to regard the formal audacity and innovation of experimental productions as an integral part of the national project of theatrical modernization. However, there is no doubt that the formal exploration pioneered by Díaz and similar playwrights occupied a primordial role in the development of Chilean theatre during the late fifties and early sixties and as such played an important role within the national project of modernization.

In 1955, discontented members of the TEUC decided to leave the foundational theatre to form their own group: Ictus. They disliked the repertory of the TEUC and believed the old masters suffered from “exhaustion and ossification” (Rojo and Sisson 526). In 1959, Jorge Díaz joined this group of discontent and enterprising theatre makers and soon became an essential part of the Ictus. In the same year, he proposes the staging of Eugène Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice Chauve*, which became a landmark in the history of Chilean theatre. On the one hand, this production led the way to staging other important European and North American plays from prominent playwrights, such as Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Luigi Pirandello. On the other hand, it marked an aesthetic inclination that greatly informed the experimental character of Díaz’s early plays. The Ictus constituted a creative and open space for theatrical exploration where Díaz and other equally enthusiastic members wholly immersed themselves in the quest for

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4 For an elucidating history of the Ictus, see Bravo-Elizondo.

5 For a complete list of the plays opened at the Ictus, see <http://www.teatroictus.cl/obras_estrenadas_teatro_ictus.htm>.
innovative theatrical forms. Ictus’s arduous practice of inventive theatre led it to stage almost ten of Díaz’s plays during the short period between 1961 and 1965. By the mid-sixties, it was evident that Jorge Díaz and the Ictus were the principal representatives of avant-gardist creation in the developing milieu of the Chilean theatre.

Despite the Ictus’s creative and pioneering endeavour, various playwrights and theatre practitioners later denounced the Ictus as an aloof space simply targeted and developed to please a minor segment of the population. The prominent Chilean playwright Alejandro Sieveking comments on this issue:

El Ictus, en los sesenta, fue el teatro de moda de la burguesía chilena, allí se podía ver los más novedoso, lo de moda, lo audaz, todo lo que enloquecía a un grupo decididamente snob.

The Ictus, in the sixties, was the fashionable theatre for the Chilean bourgeoisie. People could see there the most novel, fashionable, and audacious; everything that drove crazy a decidedly snobbish group. (101)

Even Díaz himself would later see the Ictus of the early sixties in a negative light. In a 1970 article, Díaz states that the characteristic audience of his plays was a wealthy and educated minority that rapidly embraced him as the most fashionable and sought out playwright of the moment (1970 73). Moreover, in a 1983 sardonic auto-interview titled “Lucha cuerpo a cuerpo conmigo mismo: Intento de autodifamación razonada” (“Body Wrestling with Myself: Attempt of Reasoned Auto-Defamation,”) Díaz maintains that because his socio-cultural context was the Europeanized Southern Cone, he and his contemporaries aiming to “destripar problemas burgueses para públicos burgueses sadomasoquistas con técnicas literarias europeas” (“exposing bourgeois problems with European literary techniques for sadomasochistic bourgeois
audiences”) (4). Díaz’s blunt articulation enables the distinction of three fundamental aspects which in his view afflicted the theatrical production of the Ictus at the time: the implementation of foreign European forms, the examination of bourgeois themes, and a significantly limited social audience and scope. The first two elements are relevant to our discussion because they describe the common critical perspective through which critics have traditionally and most commonly interpreted Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes*. We will examine the final element toward the end of the chapter.

*El cepillo de dientes* has characteristically been read as a work about alienation and the failure to achieve meaningful human communication. Multiple critics interpret El and Ella as a stagnant and frustrated bourgeois couple who must play the disconcerting game in order to achieve a real possibility to connect, sexually and personally, with one another. María de la Luz Hurtado elaborates this argument by focusing on the personal and domestic dimension of the dramatic action. In her book *Teatro y sociedad chilena*, she states that in the fifties and sixties the bourgeois family became a new space within the dramatic Chilean imagination and Díaz the principal explorer of its dissolution and decadence (24). In her view, Díaz’s dramaturgy explores the familial context as a conflicted space where the characters manifest their existential anguish. From this perspective, the couple’s convoluted game in *El cepillo de dientes* represents the characters’ futile and desperate effort to cope with their gray and conventional lives (44). In other words, their game constitutes a frantic attempt to break the monotonous forms of the quotidian and transcend toward a more vivid type of existence.

Critics have consistently linked this accepted view of the couple’s profound experiential distance and marked disconnectedness to the function of language within the play. Namely, they emphatically discuss Díaz’s use of language as the fundamental element that disables true
communication and meaningful relations between El and Ella. In an appropriately titled article “El cepillo de dientes: Empty Words. Empty Games?”, Ronald Burgess reiterates this standpoint. Burgess states that in El cepillo de dientes “the couple’s regurgitations produce a series of words, but they never really say anything” (29). He continues to stress the non-communicative aspect of language to finally conclude that in the play empty words are the building blocks of self-perpetuating empty games that condemn the characters to banal and inconsequential experiences which truncate all possibility of union or love (31). The dual vacuity that Burgess points out, the vacuity of words and games, describes a hopeless conjugal situation in which the serious intention to achieve meaningful connectedness is reduced to a comical amusement that succeeds only at perpetuating nonsensical scraps of dialogue.

The understanding of El cepillo de dientes as a failed attempt of transcendence both on the intra-diegetic level of characters, as critics point out, and on the developing milieu of national theatre, as Sieveking points out, constitutes an erroneous perception. The play indeed displays alienation and miscommunication in a domestic middle-class context, but these elements need to be contextualized within the heterogeneous space of the dramatic dialogue to understand that they reveal flux and mutability as the determining factors of the characters’ interaction. El and Ella’s dynamic relation of pluralism points toward a new conceptualization of subjectivity that does not speak of alienated beings, but rather of unstable subjects that utilize the ludic space of performance to explore the boundaries of being and self. It is in this manner that the characters’ exploration is an attempt to achieve meaningful experiential instances that bestow significance upon their lives. This chapter seeks to examine the couple’s game as a paradigmatic form through which Díaz also seeks new meaningful theatrical forms. We will study, in a detailed manner, Díaz’s dramatic dialogue as a space of plurality and excess that paradigmatically tackles
important questions about theatrical practice in Chile’s theatrical scene in the sixties. We will thus finally be able to appreciate Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes* as a unique dramaturgical world that elucidates the violence embedded in the creative process that gives way to meaningful forms, both in the existential realm of experience and on the practical domain of theatrical innovation.

**Jorge Díaz: an architect of words in space**

In a brief introduction to a 1967 edition of *El cepillo de dientes*, Díaz recounts a quaint anecdote about the genesis of his notorious play. Díaz assures his readers that he wrote the play on a Sunday afternoon after being struck by the particularity of two contiguous items found on the same page of the Sunday newspaper. The first one, he explains, was an advertisement for a sentimental practice in which a woman, who called herself “Esperanzada” (“Hopeful”), expressed her desire to find her soul mate. The second one was an article recounting the bizarre murder of a woman by the hands of her infuriated husband who after eight years of marriage found out that his wife had been keeping away from him the secret of her flat feet (1967 56). Putting aside the veracity that can be attributed to this story, the fact that Díaz offers it as an introduction to his play hints not only at the elements that stimulate and appeal to his imagination, but also at a certain interpretation that he gives to his own work. Díaz suggests that he is not as much preoccupied by the items—in all their humour and absurdity—themselves, but in the incongruent tension that springs from these two discordant elements in their appearance within the same newspaper page. It is thus their discrepancy within a shared space that truly interests Díaz as dramatic material. On this account, it is pertinent to mention Díaz’s special relation to space and spatial visualization in general. To do so, I include one of his commonly
quoted phrases that seem to escape a definitive and documented origin: “No vengo del lenguaje. No soy un escritor, sin un grupo detrás no puedo escribir ni una línea. Soy un arquitecto que ve las palabras en el espacio” (“I don’t come out from language. I am not a writer; without a group behind me I cannot write a single word. I am an architect that sees words in space.”) Díaz was actually an architect by profession: he studied architecture at university and taught architecture at the Universidad Católica when he became involved with the Ictus in 1959. I insist on this biographical detail in order to emphasize the importance of spatial conceptualization in his work, which seems to be a fundamental aspect systematically overlooked by criticism. In my view, space and its conceptualization is the key concept through which the use and composition of language can be rigorously examined in Díaz’s dramaturgy. From this perspective, we will examine how the dramatic dialogue in El cepillo de dientes is constructed through the agglomeration and disarticulation of multiple discordant elements that render it as a fluid and complex space that poses serious questions about the nature of human interaction and the possibility of genuine communication.

The play begins with a monologue in which Ella talks loudly and without any kind of inhibition; just like the psychiatrist recommended, she tells us. The fact that her first speech refers to an exterior voice is immensely revealing, as one of the play’s central traits is including external sources. The husband soon appears onstage. Consequently, Ella plays her jazz music louder and, since he complains about the volume, she puts on one headphone to continue listening to the radio while dutifully sitting at the table to share breakfast with her husband. As

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6 Díaz referred to this phrase in the speech he delivered when receiving the José Nuez Martín prize in November 1995. His wording, however, is slightly different: “No vengo del lenguaje. No soy un escritor. Soy un oficiante del escenario. Sin un grupo que me stimule no puedo escribir ni una línea. Soy un arquitecto que manipula las palabras en el lenguaje escrito” (“My origin is not language. I am not a writer. I am an official of the stage. Without a stimulating group I cannot write a single word. I am an architect that manipulates words in written language.”) (2005 127)
the unusual meal begins, Ella narrates fragments of what she hears on the radio, commenting on the weather forecast and superfluous advice about how to enjoy a blissful breakfast or morning exercise routine. El, on his side, is utterly immersed in reading the newspaper. His act of reading, however, is far from being a silent one, since he reads aloud bits and pieces. Ella, in her turn, continuously interrupts him and responds by reading aloud fragments of articles of a woman’s magazine. The initial dialogue is therefore composed of their discordant interventions, which pertain to different and incongruent sources that fail to merge into a single coherent conversation. The result is a general sense of confusion and randomness that can be evidenced in the following scene:

ELLA. Capricornio.

EL. ¿Qué?

ELLA. Capricornio.

EL. ¿Qué?

ELLA. Capricornio. Es el horóscopo. Mi signo es Capricornio: “Aplique al matrimonio técnicas nuevas. El amor conyugal no debe ser ciego…. El primer día de la semana estará brillante e imaginativa…” (Encantada con el descubrimiento)

¡Hoy estoy brillante e imaginativa!

EL. (Leyendo) “Por viaje al extranjero, vendo muebles de comedor muy finos, camas y colchones”.

ELLA. (Que no ha levantado la vista de la revista) Ah, no sabía que te ibas al extranjero, pero los colchones no permitiré que los vendas por ningún motivo. El comedor me da lo mismo.
EL. *(Distraído)* A mí también. Dejaremos los colchones… *(Reaccionando)* Pero si yo no voy a viajar.

ELLA. Ah, pensé que te ibas de casa.

EL. ¿Por qué dices eso?

ELLA. Bueno, últimamente estás haciendo cosas muy sospechosas… Por ejemplo, ayer te cortaste el pelo.

EL. Fue un error. Entré creyendo que era una farmacia.

[ELLA. Capricorn.

EL. What?

ELLA. Capricorn.

EL. What?

ELLA. Capricorn. It’s the horoscope. My sign is Capricorn: “Apply new techniques to marriage. Conjugal love should not be blind…. The first day of the week you will be brilliant and imaginative…” *(Delighted with the discovery)* I will be brilliant and imaginative!

EL. *(Reading)* “Travelling abroad and selling high quality dining furniture, beds, and mattresses.”

ELLA. *(Still looking at the magazine)* Oh, I didn’t know you were travelling abroad, but I wont allow you under any circumstance to sell the mattresses. I don’t care about the dining table.

EL. *(Absent-minded)* Me neither. We’ll leave the mattresses… *(Reacting)* But I’m not travelling.

ELLA. Oh, I thought you were leaving home.
EL. Why do you say that?

ELLA. Well, lately you’ve been doing very suspicious things… For example, yesterday you cut your hair.

EL. It was a mistake. I went in thinking it was a pharmacy.] (80)

This fragment exemplifies the theme of miscommunication that is widely commented on by critics of El cepillo de dientes. There is clearly no understanding between the characters that seem to be reciprocally ignorant and indifferent to the other’s words. Ella does not care that El is leaving her and is similarly impassive to his response that he is actually not leaving her or the country. Therefore, from an exclusively thematic viewpoint, this scene accurately illustrates George Woodyard’s contention that in Díaz’s play the couple’s “dialogue’ generally consists of two intercalated monologues” (61). However, Woodyard’s understanding of the couple’s dramatic dialogue as a series of disconnected monologues describes a narrow critical perspective that only considers miscommunication as a thematic concern. Nonetheless, the disconnectedness between the two characters should not only be regarded thematically, but also, and most importantly, as a structural device. The intersection of miscommunication on the thematic and structural axes is the key element that constructs the dramatic dialogue as a fluid space of complex human interaction. In order to understand this, it is imperative to address the fundamental dramatic question of what essentially constitutes dramatic dialogue.

Jan Mukařovský’s seminal essay “Two Studies of Dialogue” (1940) provides us with the theoretical framework to do so. Mukařovský posits the relationship between the interlocutors “I” and “you” as one of the essential characteristic of dramatic dialogue. This relationship, he contends, is necessarily one of tension because it springs from the polarity of the interlocutors who constantly shift positions between the role of speaker and listener. This constant interchange
constructs the dialogue on the basis of mobility where the fundamental element becomes precisely the space between the interlocutors. In Mukařovský’s own words, “the interrelation of the participants in a dialogue is therefore felt as a tension not bound to either of the two speaking persons but actually existing “between” them; it is thus objectified as the “psychological situation” of the dialogue” (86).

Jiří Veltruský, a student and successor of Mukařovský, in his prominent study Drama as Literature (1942), further develops Mukařovský’s conceptualization of dialogue. Veltruský stresses two fundamental elements to assert that dialogue categorically differs from monologue. First, dialogue unfolds in time and space; namely, in a specific “here and now.” Second, dialogue and the extra-linguistic situation (what Mukařovský calls “psychological situation”) develop through an “intense and reciprocal” relation. To fully comprehend Veltruský’s theorization, it is important to understand that by extra-linguistic situation he means not only the material situation that surrounds the speakers, “but also the speakers themselves, their mentality, intentions, knowledge pertinent to the dialogue, their mutual relations, the tensions between them, and so on” (10). The understanding of dramatic dialogue as a present event that unfolds fundamentally as an interstitial process which takes into account the context, position, and composition of each of the dramatic characters permits us to consider El cepillo de dientes from a more inclusive perspective. From this perspective, we can regard the characters’ incongruous and purportedly disconnected utterances not as incompatible parts of a broken communicative system, but rather as heterogeneous pieces that integrally comprise and advance the dramatic dialogue.

This can be seen as the convoluted breakfast progresses and the couple continues to develop an intricate dialogue that further reveals the characters’ complex dialogical interaction.
At a specific point, El confesses to Ella that he is deeply in love with her and Ella advises him to think about something else that will make him forget her:

ELLA. Bueno, entonces piensa… en el colesterol.

EL. ¿Y qué es el colesterol?

ELLA. Un… un insecticida.

EL. Pero si viene en shampoo.

ELLA. Ay, si viene en shampoo entonces es para el dolor de cabeza.

EL. (Pensando en forma concentrada) ¡Colesterol! ¡Colesterol!... (Levantándose de la mecedora desanimado) Ah, es inútil. Tú eres para mí mucho más importante que el colesterol. Eres diferente. ¡No eres como todas!


[ELLA. Well, then think… about cholesterol.

EL. And what is cholesterol?

ELLA. An… an insecticide.

EL. But it comes in a shampoo.

ELLA. Oh, if it comes in a shampoo, then it’s for the headache.

EL. (Thinking hard) Cholesterol! Cholesterol!... (Discouraged. Gets up from the rocking chair) Oh, it’s useless. You’re so much more important to me than cholesterol. You’re different. You’re not like the others.
ELLA. *(Reading in a woman’s magazine)* “Oh, are you like the others… with no initiative? Follow the example of Dora Zamudio. Until recently, she was a mere employee at a lingerie store; today she makes three thousand escudos a month analysing gallstones in a laboratory. Our system prepares you to progress and be someone.] (85)

This humorous scene shows the tension that guides the couple’s interaction throughout the entire play. To begin with, Ella rejects El’s love proposal and diverts the dialogue to the domain of health and hygiene through the mention of common items, such as shampoo, headaches, and cholesterol. El instantly reacts to this semantic change and promptly returns the dialogue to its melodramatic course with the bleak stock phrase: “You’re not like the others.” However, this melodramatic cliché immediately acquires a markedly different meaning in Ella’s mouth when she reads out the words “are you like the others… with no initiative?” Printed in a woman’s magazine, these words reflect a sociological phenomenon in the Chilean society where women were being eagerly encouraged to enter the work force. The fact that the same words can express such different realities –one concerning a working-woman and another a passive loved one– reveals the extent to which the dialogical tension between the characters results from the confrontation and interaction of their own individual viewpoints.

On this issue, Mukařovský contends that the second determining characteristic of dramatic dialogue is the “interpenetration of several contextures” whereby “contexture” constitutes the meaning or value each interlocutor attributes to specific words or theme from their own defined and particular point of view (88-9). In simpler terms, this means that each interlocutor attributes a certain meaning to a given word depending on his or her own context or

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7 For a discussion on the role of women during the national process of industrialization, see Collier (285-8).
extra-linguistic situation. This premise is evident in the previous scene in which the meaning invested into the quoted words reveals the characters’ contrasting position and intentions: El speaks as an enamored lover who wishes to impress his woman and she instead envisions the possibility of a career. The two differing viewpoints show the tension between the characters in their attempt to attribute their own specific meaning and interpretation to all utterances and words. Furthermore, this tension shows how their verbal interaction constitutes a series of semantic collisions that ultimately construct the dramatic dialogue as an unstable space where meaning fluctuates and is variable.

It is important to note that dramatic dialogue as a sophisticated space of confronting viewpoints develops within a specific temporal frame. On this matter, Veltruský explains that dramatic dialogue is essentially dynamic because the semantic values of its continually-confronting contexts emerge gradually and in time (27). This means that the meanings and semantic values of any dialogical space are not initially defined from the onset, but rather constructed and developed through the interlocutors’ gradual participation in dialogue. Veltruský comments on the details of this dynamic process:

The unit of meaning stemming from one context enters the other contexts not when it is picked up again by the following speakers but as soon as it is uttered, when the interlocutors receive it. It is at that moment that the semantic shifts it undergoes in dialogue take place. (25)

This dynamic process is evident in the previously quoted scene of *El cepillo de dientes*. As soon as El expresses his love to Ella, she receives and interprets his words and instantly formulates a responsive utterance that she anticipates will be understood by El from her own specific viewpoint. Therefore, the semantic shift that she performs in her immediate response is an
attempt to control meaning and direct conversation. This demonstrates Veltruský’s contention that “In dialogue, each utterance, even each word, is to some extent an action” (33). From this perspective, we can regard the couple’s dialogical interaction as a continuum of actions and reactions through which they endlessly negotiate meanings and semantic contexts.

The multitude of voices that indirectly enter the dialogue through the couple’s copious quoting and game-playing suggests that the play’s dramatic dialogue should more precisely be conceived as a network of actions. In the play, there are two types of speakers unequal in form and function: the couple and the extraneous voices. As we have seen, El and Ella are immersed in the dynamic semantic struggle of interpreting and reconfiguring each other’s words, but while they voice and listen to external voices, their dialogue develops another level of interpretation and semantic tension. When Ella repeats the radio’s news and announcements or reads out loud her woman’s magazine, she is evaluating and selecting precise elements from a given body of information in order to adequately respond to El’s prior utterances in a way that her words may persuade him and be understood in her own precise sense. This dual interpretative exercise of mediating commercial and journalistic voices and responding to her husband’s interventions also constitutes a doubly elaborate effort for El who must take in and respond to both her remarks and the external sources that she incorporates. In order to further understand the intricacy of this arduous process of interpretative action and response, let us consider a dramatic instance in the second act in which Ella, dressed up as Antona, pretends to have discovered the dead body of the wife:

ANTONA. ¡Ay, Dios mío!... ¿Qué ha pasado?

EL. (Cantando el conocido tango de Gardel):

“Sus ojos se cerraron
y el mundo sigue andando,
su boca que era mía
ya no me besa más…”

ANTONA. (Espantada al ver la insensibilidad de El, que canta tangos) ¿Se ha vuelto loco?... ¿Es que se olvidó que tiene a su mujer tirada en el dormitorio? ... ¿Es que no tiene compasión por nadie?...

EL. (Canta):

“Y ahora que la evoco
sumido en mi quebranto
las lágrimas prensadas
se niegan a brotar
y no tengo el consuelo
de poder llorar…”

ANTONA. (Retorciéndose las manos) ¿Por qué lo hizo? ... ¿Por qué?

EL. “Por qué sus alas
tan cruel quemó la vida.
Por qué esta mueca siniestra de la suerte…
Quise abrigarla
Y más pudo la muerte…”

[ANTONA. Oh, my God!... What happened?

EL. (Singing Gardel’s famous tango):

“Her eyes have closed forever
and the world keeps on turning,
her mouth, once mine,
no longer kisses me…”

ANTONA. (Outraged because of his insensitivity as he sings tangos) Have you gone mad?... Have you forgotten that your dead wife is lying on the bedroom floor?...
Have you no compassion for anyone?...

EL. (Sings):
“And now that I evoke her
plunged into my despair
my tears refuse to flow
and I don’t have the consolation
of being able to cry…”

ANTONA. (Twisting her hands) Why did you do it? ... Why?

EL. “Why did life
so cruelly burn her wings.

Why this sinister grimace of fate…

I wanted to protect her

and death was stronger than me…”] (111)

The scene continues as Antona keeps asking El why he murdered his wife and he fuels her outrage by continuing to sing fragments of the famous tango. Eventually, the scene comes to an end when Antona cannot take it anymore and decides to break the record. The whole scene shows the interpretative complexity of the couple’s dramatic interaction throughout the play. Ella, pretending to be the maid, shapes her speech accordingly to express feigned outrage and disgust while simultaneously reconfiguring the relevant meanings embedded in El’s sung tango
in order to adequately respond and persuade him to answer her alarmed questions. El, despite acting as a ventriloquist figure that does not speak his own words, must similarly evaluate Antona’s pressing questions and select relevant fragments of the tango in order to answer her questions in a way that her ensuing intervention will still enable him to return to the tango. The characters’ strenuous and demanding labour illustrates the extent to which the manifold external voices that enter the play—newspaper articles, magazine advertisements, radio announcements, song lyrics, and biblical paraphrasing, among others—are not irrelevant elements that disrupt the dramatic dialogue, but rather integrally-incorporated elements that fully interact and construct the dialogical context.

For this reason, the dramatic dialogue of *El cepillo de dientes* does not constitute an assemblage of “two intercalated monologues.” Our analysis shows that the dramatic dialogue of the play is a complex network of innumerable acts of interpretation, mediation, and response that coordinate and materialize within a single and contained structure of verbal interaction. The characters continually perform dynamic processes of semantic reconfiguration with the desire to direct and control the gradually-forming dialogical context. Moreover, they incorporate a wide array of cultural and social contexts that in turn shape and partake within the dialogical development of the dramatic action. Hence, it is through this relentless and plural interaction of the characters and the manifold external contexts that the play’s dramatic dialogue fully shows itself as a coherent and all-encompassing dialogical space. And so, from this perspective, we can finally understand Diaz’s own judgment that he is not a literary writer, but more precisely an architect of words in space.
A hyperbolic imagining of plurality

Critics have recurrently argued that Díaz fills El and Ella’s dramatic world with various types of modern noise pollution in order to denounce the dangers of our consumerist and media-driven modern lives. Castedo-Ellerman supports this view by writing that in *El cepillo de dientes* “El mundo del comercio se entromete en la vida privada. El hombre moderno finalmente acepta la invasión de su humanidad por la ciencia y las astutas asociaciones comerciales guían vidas a través de la dictadura de la propaganda comercial”. (“The world of commerce meddles into private life. Modern man finally accepts that science invades his humanity and that astute commercial associations guide lives through their dictatorship of commercial propaganda”) (126). Becky Boling puts forth a similar viewpoint asserting that Díaz’s play is an active criticism of a bourgeois narcissistic and self-gratifying life style heavily dependent on consumerism and Americanization. Furthermore, she argues, “Since desire is mediated through the exhausted, exploitative signs of consumerism, the play suggests that there is no recognition of a humane system of values or ethics” and thus “El and Ella are pawns of the signs created by consumerism” (100). Castedo-Ellerman and Boling both see in *El cepillo de dientes* a sustained critique against a modern consumerist lifestyle that robs the human being of his or her intrinsic humane values and replaces them with commodities and the hollowness of mass media. For Castedo-Ellerman this occurs through the “dictatorship of commercial propaganda” and for Boiling through the “exploitative signs of consumerism.” Nevertheless, both critics fail to explain exactly how this dictatorship or exploitative action comes into being. This shortcoming in their analyses follows the common critical assumption that incorporation mediatic and commercial elements constitutes Díaz’s critique and condemnation. In other words, they argue that it is merely through the insertion of these elements that Díaz maintains his harsh
denunciation. This indicates that there seems to be a systematic critical failing to comprehensively account for the specific mode in which these commercial and mediatic sources operate within the play. Our purpose is thus to examine the function of these plural sources in the creation of an exuberantly heterogeneous dialogical context that dissolves the individuality of the characters and persistently hinders the possibility of communication. This will reveal *El cepillo de dientes* as a hyperbolized enactment of the social dimension of language within the realm of human interaction.

With this object, I will begin by focusing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. Bakhtin principally argues that verbal discourse is an utterly social phenomenon. He contends that language is “social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (259). In his view, language is a dialogical phenomenon in which different discourses, worldviews, contexts, and social languages come to interact, shape, and influence one another (282). This markedly social and dynamic trait of verbal discourse is the characteristic that defines and shapes the dramatic world and dialogue of *El cepillo de dientes*. Let us begin our analysis by focusing on the fact that in the play the characters introduce copious commercial and non-commercial voices that saturate the dramatic dialogue with an exuberance of meanings and intentions. This feature describes the characteristic mechanics of Bakhtin’s conception of heteroglossia set out in “Discourse in the Novel.” Bakhtin argues that all languages dialogically interact and juxtapose within the common plane of heteroglossia. From this initial contention, he theorizes that heteroglossia constitutes the quintessentially plural environment where all languages in their unique conceptualization of the world (in their objects, meanings, values, and viewpoints) dialogically interrelate, struggle, contradict, and complement one another. Heteroglossia is thus the dialogical space where
languages live and develop (291-2). From this definition, he goes on to propose that language is most importantly the dynamic space of heteroglossia because language is “a concrete heteroglot conception of the world” (293). The principal implication of language as a concrete heteroglot worldview is that language is necessarily imbued with values and meanings that ideologically pervade and saturate it. For this reason, Bakhtin argues, language has no neutral or anonymous words or forms: every utterance is in itself a compound of specific accents and intentions. In *El cepillo de dientes*, the insertion of copious voices and external sources actively introduces the characters to the dialogical space of heteroglossia. Through these insertions, El and Ella continually confront a plurality of worldviews, intentions, and ideological values that they must assimilate and assess in order to produce their own utterances. Nonetheless, while this process invariably happens in our everyday use of language, Díaz presents us with a dramatic world in which the heteroglot scope of language overpowers the characters’ ability to generate a markedly individual speech. This phenomenon is evident in the following scene:

ELLA. Te escuchan. (*Muy cariñoso*) Amorcito…

EL. ¿Sí, mi amor?

ELLA. Por favor…

EL. …hmm.

ELLA. Fíjate un poco más.

EL. ¿En qué?

ELLA. No ensucies el mantel.

EL. ¡No me lo digas todos los días!

ELLA. (*Subiendo el tono*) ¡No hagas ruidos al comer!

EL. ¡No hagas sonar la cucharilla!
ELLA. ¡No mojes el azúcar!

EL. ¡No frunzas las cejas cuando muerdes las tostadas!

ELLA. ¡No arrastres los pies!

EL. (Gritando) ¡No leas en la mesa!

ELLA. (Gritando) ¡No me grites!

EL. ¡No me escupas!

ELLA. (Aullando) ¡No voy a permitir groserías en mi propia casa!

EL. (Aullando) ¡Yo no voy a permitir que me humilles delante del perro!

ELLA. ¿De qué perro me estás hablando? (Ya no se les entiende nada porque gritan a la vez sin darse respiro. Casi ladran. Bruscamente ambos se callan. Ahora bruscamente inician los gritos simultáneos y vuelven a callarse. Silencio cargado de tensión. Cada uno se enfrasca en su lectura. Leyendo).

[ELLA. They can hear you. (Very affectionately) Sweetie…

EL. Yes, my love?

ELLA. Please…

EL. …hmm.

ELLA. Pay a little bit more of attention.

EL. To what?

ELLA. Don’t get the tablecloth dirty.

EL. Stop telling me that every single day!

ELLA. (Speaking louder) Don’t make noises when you eat!

EL. Don’t make noises with the little spoon!

ELLA. Don’t get the sugar wet!
EL. Don’t frown when you bite your toast!

ELLA. Don’t drag your feet!

EL. (Yelling) Don’t read at the table!

ELLA. (Yelling) Don’t yell at me!

EL. Don’t spit at me!

ELLA. (Howling) I’m not gonna allow any rude behaviour in my own house!

EL. (Howling) I’m not gonna allow you to humiliate me in front of the dog!

ELLA. What dog are you talking about? (Nothing can be made out because they yell at

the same time without pause. They are almost barking. They both stop talking

abruptly. Then, suddenly, they begin yelling at the same time and stop again.

The silence is filled with tension. They both immerse themselves in their reading.

(Reading).] (90-1)

In this scene of nagging and mutual contempt, the dialogue begins as Ella gives an
utterance that denotes a specific reaction to the situation: “They can hear you.” However, this
initial remark soon gives way to a series of reprimands that do not seem to spring from the
particular situation of the characters, but rather follow the stereotypical form of a couple
bickering with one another. This becomes evident with El’s last remark that he will not be
humiliated in front of the dog. It is clear from Ella’s last remark that they do not have a dog and
that the contents expressed in their bickering do not necessarily relate to their dramatic reality.
Therefore, El and Ella do not speak as singular characters; rather, stereotypical social voices give
form to their dialogue. This scene is one of many instances in the play in which the characters’
individuality and personal perspective are subdued and overpowered by the dialogical forces of
language. In his discussion of heteroglossia, Bakhtin also posits that “As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (293). However, specific instances in *El cepillo de dientes* reveal that for the characters, language is constantly on the verge of belonging entirely to someone else.

In Díaz’s play, the surplus of languages that partake in the dramatic dialogue overpowers the couple’s ability to assimilate and reconfigure the different mediatic and social contexts. As a consequence, the characters’ speech is constantly under the threat of failing to concretize in individual speech and dissolving into the heteroglot affluence of the dialogue. This indicates that within the heterogeneous exuberance of the dramatic dialogue there is a latent horizon of personal dissolution. El and Ella constantly face the possibility of losing their individual speech and with it their personal marker of individuality. It is in this manner that the socially hyperbolic dialogue of the play questions the creation of a fixed notion of subjectivity. In order to better examine this condition, let us focus on the particular scene that alludes to the title of the play:

EL: …sólo que esta mañana no pude encontrar mi cepillo de dientes.

ELLA. En ciertas comidas… Dentol después de las comidas. (*Sonriendo en forma automática*) “¡El dentífrico con gusto a whisky escocés!” “Yo, como Susan Hayward y miles de artistas de Hollywood, sólo uso… dentadura postiza!”

EL Y ELLA: (*Al unísino cantan un jingle*)

“Un centímetro basta

en cepillo familiar,

con la misma pasta

da mucho más, más, más…”
EL. (Reaccionando) ¡Sólo dije que no pude encontrar mi cepillo de dientes esta mañana!

ELLA. Ay, eres un descuidado. (Ella abre la revista femenina y lee) Mira, mira lo que dice Miss Helen, “la amiga de la mujer frente al espejo…” (Leyendo) “El cutis, el cabello, la dentadura, cualquiera que sea vuestro rasgo más hermoso, empecemos desde ahora por darle ese toque justo de arreglo extra que hechiza. Sobre todo, mantenga los dientes libres de sarro, la nicotina y las partículas de cerdo o bacalao, mediante el uso constante de la soda caústica. Así su novio dirá, su novio dirá…”

EL. (Novio fascinado) ¡Tiene algo indefinible que me atrae!... Ah, (reccionando)
¡Basta, sólo dije que no pude encontrar mi cepillo de dientes esta mañana!

ELLKA. Ay, entonces, no entiendo. ¿Quieres que vaya a ver?

EL. Será inútil. Es el colmo que mi único objeto personal, el refugio de mi individualidad, también haya desaparecido.

[EL: …it’s just that I couldn’t find my toothbrush this morning.

ELLA. At some meals… Dentol after meals. (Smiling automatically) “The toothpaste that tastes like Scotch whisky!” “I, like Susan Hayward and thousands of other Hollywood artists, only use… fake teeth!”

ELY ELLA: (They sing a jingle in unison)

“An inch is enough

for the family toothbrush,

with the same paste

you get more, more, and more…”
EL. *(Reacting)* I just said that I couldn’t find my toothbrush this morning!

ELLA. Oh, you’re so absentminded. *(She opens the woman’s magazine and reads)* Look, look what Miss Helen says, “the woman’s friend in front of the mirror…” *(Reading)* “Your face, your hair, your teeth, whichever your best feature is, let’s begin now by giving it the extra touch it needs to be captivating. Most importantly, keep your teeth clean of plaque, nicotine, and particles of pork or codfish through the constant use of caustic soda. That way your boyfriend will say, your boyfriend will say…”

EL. *(Delighted boyfriend)* There’s just something about her that attracts me!... Oh, *(reacting)* Stop, I just said that I couldn’t find my toothbrush this morning!

ELLA. Oh, I don’t understand then. Do you want me to go see?

EL. It would be useless. It’s unbelievable that my only personal object, the refuge of my individuality, has also gone missing.] *(91-2)*

As the scene develops, El finally finds his toothbrush, but it is stained with white paint because she had been using it to polish her shoes. To appease his outrage, she allows him to use hers, since they are married and can thus share everything. El becomes more infuriated and responds aggressively, stating that marriage should not go that far and so he proceeds to hide under the table and pretends to be in the bathroom, which, according to him, is the only place where he can be by himself and feel a sense of peace.

This scene powerfully demonstrates the tension of the potential dissolution of the individual within the social dynamics of the dialogue. El’s decisive complaint, that he cannot find his toothbrush, becomes the anchor of reality through which he expresses his individual
point of view. Nevertheless, he constantly slips into the dialogical space where he loses himself within other voices. First, he joins Ella in singing the publicity jingle, and second, he impersonates the delighted boyfriend. Both slips come to an end when he reacts and returns to his imperative claim about the toothbrush. The toothbrush thus constitutes his marker of singularity and he accordingly calls it his “only personal object, the refuge of my individuality.” The fact that his toothbrush has been taken and used by someone else and then that he is given the option to share another toothbrush, reveals the extent to which the individuality of the characters is constantly under the threat of annihilation. These are characters that continually struggle to emerge from the heterogeneous array of voices that talk through them, define them, and invade their personal voice. The play’s title, El cepillo de dientes, an ingenious detail, ironically contrasts with the entire composition of the dramatic dialogue because the toothbrush, a sign of individuality, is continually and overwhelmingly effaced throughout the action.

The characters’ threatened individuality poses an important question about subjectivity in relation to language. Catherine Belsey relevantly explains that “As Emile Benveniste argues, it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity, because it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as ‘I,’ as the subject of a sentence. It is in language, in other words, that people constitute themselves as subjects” (54). The constitution of the subject based on the self-positioning of a linguistic ‘I’ reveals the extent to which the subjectivity of Díaz’s characters is threatened and called into question. El and Ella are immersed in a hyperbolic dialogical space that hinders their possibility to develop a markedly individual speech through which they can reassert their individuality. Simply put, the plural dramatic space of the play robs them of the ability to self-proclaim themselves as ‘I.’ Since the characters cannot develop speech enunciated from the ‘I’ position, then the possibility of developing a consciousness of the self is
also truncated because “If consciousness is in the end consciousness of the self, this in turn implies that consciousness depends on differentiation, and specifically on Benveniste’s differentiation between ‘I’ and ‘you,’ a process made possible by language” (Belsey 56). In *El cepillo de dientes*, the fact that El and Ella fail to occupy the linguistic position of the ‘I’ indicates that their speech cannot be differentiated from the otherness of ‘you.’ The play thus disables a notion of contrast that would seem to deny the formation of the subject. However, the hyperbolic dialogical space of the play should not be regarded as one of contrast and otherness, but rather as a fundamental space of difference. Illuminating this view, Linda Hutcheon notably contends that “‘difference,’” unlike “otherness,” has no exact opposite against which to define itself” (6).

The concept of difference enables an unstable and varying notion of subjectivity that sheds light on Díaz’s characters. In his discussion about the postmodern character, Peter Currie writes that the focus of attention has shifted from a notion of an irreducible human essence “to a recognition of subjectivity as the trace of plural and intersecting discourses, of non-unified, contradictory ideologies, the product of a relational system which is finally that of discourse itself” (64). It is not my intention to posit Díaz’s characters as postmodern characters, but Currie’s conceptualization of subjectivity does serve as suitable framework to describe El and Ella’s ontological composition. These two characters indeed constitute relational positions in language that fluctuate in accordance with the dialogical dynamics of the dramatic space. Their subjectivity is determined by the notions of difference and flux in the sense that they emerge from the juxtaposition of voices and languages and lose themselves in chains of signification. This understanding of Diaz’s characters in accordance with a postmodern conceptualization of the subject enables us to revisit the theme of communication in *El cepillo de dientes* from a
different and more critical perspective. With this in mind, let us focus on a brief article written by Díaz titled “La erosión del lenguaje” (“The erosion of language.”) In this article, the writer discusses the constitution of a plural dramatic dialogue and its effects on the functionality of communication:

Eso es lo que hice: ¡un robo instantáneo! Y descubrí que el lenguaje adquiría frescura en la misma proporción en que perdía funcionalidad. La obra se transformaba en algo orgánico, imprevisible….

El diálogo collage me permitía quebrar continuamente toda intencionalidad, toda identidad. Ya no me traicionarían mis propias ideas, ni mis propias visiones, ni mis prejuicios porque trabajaba con un material de selección procedente de otros prejuicios, de otras intransigencias, de otros planos de la expresión verbal que no eran ¡afortunadamente! teatrales ni “artísticas”.

El lenguaje periodístico, los anuncios de las latas de conserva, los folletos de turismo, los libros de oraciones, los libros de matemáticas, los “comics”, los chistes que se oyen en los bares, los letreros o inscripciones en los retretes públicos, el lenguaje de los políticos o de los religiosos, las leyes (que son muy cómicas), todo sirve para hacer hablar a unos personajes.

[That’s what I did: an instant theft! And I discovered that language acquired freshness as it lost its functionality. The play turned into something organic, unpredictable….

The collage dialogue allowed me to continually break down all sense of intentionality, all sense of identity. My own ideas, my own visions, my own prejudices would no longer betray me because I was working with a selection of material that came
from other prejudices, other types of intransigence, other types of verbal expression that were not theatrical or “artistic.”

Journalistic language, ads in cans, tourism flyers, prayer books, math books, comics, jokes you hear in bars, signs or entries in public washrooms, the language of politicians or clergy men, laws (which are very amusing), everything can be used to make characters talk.] (77)

Díaz’s description of the “collage dialogue” explicitly describes the heterogeneous voices that he incorporates in his dramatic texts. These multiple sources integrate added levels of intentions, ideological values and meanings into the dramatic dialogue that override his consciousness as a writer and turn his characters into plural and unstable positions in language. In this manner, the mechanics of writing of the “collage dialogue” share some similarities with what Julia Kristeva calls “writing-as-experience-of-limits.” Kristeva argues that postmodernist literature is in itself an experience of the limits of language as communicative system, of the limits of subjectivity, and the social realm (137). Díaz’s dramatic writing examines the limits of language to the extent that, as he points out, the social and mediatic polyphony of his dramatic dialogues risks the basic communicative function of language. In El cepillo de dientes, the hyperbolic dramatic space turns the characters’ speeches into fascinating instances of multiple and unstable significations that never become the common and easily-recognizable forms through which “the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday)” language is attained (Bakhtin 270). The characters’ particular condition, as subjects defined by the difference and instability of language, is thus the source of their lack of communication. They fail to efficiently communicate because their speech acts, full of surplus elements that amalgamate dissimilar sources, lack the unity and recognizable
quality of everyday language. For this reason, although the play pretends to be about a married couple’s quotidian domestic interaction, it utterly surpasses this domain.

Critics have traditionally argued that Díaz’s play portrays an alienated couple that systematically fails to communicate. However, this interpretation is based on an understanding of El and Ella as integral beings who possess a coherent identity and who unproblematically differentiate themselves from the dialogical space that surrounds them. Nevertheless, when we consider El and Ella as dynamic subjectivities within language, the focus of the play is no longer the lack of communication between two defined subjects, but rather becomes an exploration of the mechanics of language and the limits of subjectivity. *El cepillo de dientes* is a brilliant examination of the signifiable possibilities of language within a hyperbolic space of dialogism. The characters constitute open subjects of intersecting languages in which the notions of fixity and definitiveness carry no true weight. For this reason, we cannot interpret them as distanced and bickering spouses who possess an articulated psychological dimension, but rather as linguistic and social beings that display the functioning of language through their vicious and humorous interactions. In this sense, we can contend that the couple’s perpetual misunderstandings and personal and sexual disagreements inextricably speak of the irreducible pluralism of language and its relation to self and subjectivity. Therefore, in essence, *El cepillo de dientes* is a dramaturgical exploration of language and the mode in which language constructs and defines the human subject.

**Performance and the “exacerbation” of reality**

It may appear that the concrete ontological consequence resulting from the dialogical space of *El cepillo de dientes* is the characters’ formation of an unstable consciousness that does
add up to a coherent sense of self. Notwithstanding this appearance, it is crucial to note that in
the play the characters wilfully produce this plural dialogical space and its consequent effects of
flux and instability. El and Ella repeatedly play the same game voluntarily creating the
vertiginous and heterogeneous space of plurality that overwhelms and overpowers them. In his
seminal theorization of play, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Johan
Huizinga maintains that play, in order to be a genuinely authentic enterprise, is necessarily a
voluntary action (26). Moreover, he argues that play requires that its participants whole-heartedly
believe and obey the rules because “as soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world
collapses.” This indicates that the rules of play “are absolutely binding and allow no doubt” (30).
It is evident in *El cepillo de dientes* that the characters earnestly commit to the contingencies of
the game without a trace of doubt or hesitation. They continually immerse themselves within the
menacing space of plurality that threatens to efface them and their individuality. Therefore, the
question with which the play confronts us and which we will now address is why precisely do
these characters so unreservedly play the dangerous game of personal dissolution.

The couple’s game is largely determined by their frantic inclusion of external sources and
voices that force them into intermittent acts of impersonation. These multiple impersonations
impose on them the ontological burden of circumstantially becoming another real or imagined
self. Such instability overwhelms the characters’ subjective individuality and questions their
personal boundaries of unity and self. This phenomenon is most evidently displayed in the
second act when Ella impersonates the naïve maid, Antona. Ella enters the stage wearing a wig
and an old dress, two elements that visually mark her temporary overtaking of another identity.
In this instance, Ella, for the first time, receives a fixed name, Antona. Up to this point, El has
been calling Ella by various names, none of which are ever confirmed as her real one. The
contradiction that Ella acquires a stable identity precisely as she wholly impersonates another being indicates the extent to which Díaz’s characters are shifting and changeable beings whose individual boundaries of selfhood cannot be clearly determined. Rajeev S. Patke argues that through the concept of the dialogic Bakhtin “makes an ontological principle out of the idea of process” (30). Although Patke is specifically discusses historical processes, his contention enables us to further discuss the characters’ game. We have seen that dialogism, as a continuous process of dynamic interaction, is a social phenomenon antithetical to the notions of fixedness and stability. This characteristic fluidity of language can be further conceptualized to imply the persistent development of an unstable self. In El cepillo de dientes, the hyperbolic dialogical space of the dramatic dialogue is fundamentally linked to the characters’ endless process of becoming. El and Ella constantly introduce foreign voices through which they momentarily become someone else. This particular dynamism turns them into decidedly mutable beings that can only be defined through the notion of process.8

Toward the end of the second act, a dramatic instance marked by Ella’s ontological instability hints at the nature and purpose of the characters’ game:

EL. …Isabel, Mercedes, Soledad… ¿es realmente necesario que tengamos que repetir esto todos los días?

ELLA. ¿A qué te refieres, cariño?

EL. Sabes perfectamente bien a qué me refiero.

ELLA. Mi parte no es fácil tampoco. Si por lo menos se te ocurriera algo nuevo.

EL. Eso es lo más espantoso. ¡Que siempre hay algo nuevo! Para hacernos el amor vamos a tener que contratar a un asesor…

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8 Belsey stresses this relation between language and subjectivity as a process (albeit from a psychoanalytic perspective): “Unfixed, unsatisfied, the human being is not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change” (132).
ELLA. Yo creo que las ideas iniciales no eran malas, lo que pasa es que lo hemos bordado tanto que ahora están prácticamente agotadas.

EL. ¿Qué podemos hacer?

ELLA. Nada, dejemos las cosas en su lugar.

EL. Es verdad que si no te estrangulo todos los días no te quedas tranquila.

ELLA. Bueno, eso es muy corriente… ¿Qué esposa decente no desea ser estrangulada de vez en cuando?

EL. No, si no te lo critico. Pero no me eches en cara que yo también tengo algunas debilidades.

ELLA. No, si yo no te critico nada, solamente que no entiendo por qué no vives con Antona y ya está.

EL. Es una idea que ya se me ha ocurrido. Siempre que Antona acepte disfrazarse de ti.

Bueno, pongamos las cosas en su lugar.

ELLA. Nada. (Un silencio)

EL. ¿Y si hiciéramos el amor en latín?

ELLA. Es una lengua muerta.

[EL. …Isabel, Mercedes, Soledad… is it really necessary that we repeat this every single day?

ELLA. What are you talking about, honey?

EL. You know exactly what I’m talking about.

ELLA. My part is not easy either. If you would at least think of something new.

EL. That is the most horrific thing. There is always something new! We’re going to have to hire a consultant to make love to one another…
ELLA. I think the initial ideas weren’t bad, but we have worked it so much that now we’ve exhausted them.

EL. What can we do?

ELLA. Nothing. Let’s leave everything in its place.

EL. It is true that you’re not fine if I don’t strangle you every single day.

ELLA. Well, it’s very common… What decent wife doesn’t want to be strangled every now and then?

EL. No, I’m not judging you. But don’t blame me because I also have some weaknesses.

ELLA. No, I’m not judging you, but I just don’t understand why you don’t simply live with Antona.

EL. I’ve already thought of it. As long as Antona agrees to dress up like you. Well, let’s put everything back in its place.

ELLA. Nothing. ( Silence)

EL. And if we made love in Latin?

ELLA. It’s a dead language.] (118-9)

Critics have traditionally regarded this scene as the climactic point where El and Ella culminate their erotic game and achieve their much-delayed union. Nevertheless, Díaz precedes the scene with a revealing stage direction that indicates the error of this interpretation. He specifies that the two bodies “Se acercan apasionadamente e inician una grotesca parodia del acercamiento o del abrazo amoroso. Toda la pantomima de grotesca incomunicación física se desarrolla siguiendo una música distorsionada” (“They approach one another passionately and begin a grotesque parody of the act of approaching one another or a loving embrace. All the pantomime of grotesque physical non-communication develops in-tune with distorted music”) (117). The
indication that this scene must be played as a parody and pantomime reveals that El and Ella do not truly achieve a moment of union and physical communication. On the contrary, the characters continue to seek a real experience of togetherness. This notion of true connectedness, however, only seems conceivable as a continuous process of dissolution of the self into a plural context of otherness. This becomes evident with El’s remark that he will agree to live with Antona only if she agrees to impersonate Ella. El does not want to experience Ella or Antona as integral beings, but rather, as changeable ones. Díaz’s characters thus need the sense of process, ontological flux, and mutability to experience the immediacy of genuine and veritable interaction. It is only their vicarious practice of impersonation and its ability to annihilate their singular boundaries that bestows meaning to their quotidian lives. This explains why Ella so categorically rejects El’s proposition to make love in Latin. Latin, as a dead language, is bereft of the dialogism of speech experience and thus constitutes the definitive antinomy of the couple’s visceral desire for plurality, flux, and the vortex of otherness.

In an insightful article titled “Spanish American Theatre of the 50s and 60s: Critical Perspectives on Role Plying,” Eugene L. Moretta asserts that in some Latin American plays of the sixties, the form of game functions as meaningful means to “exacerbate” reality. Moretta puts forth the idea that the action of recreating experience, namely the action of role-playing, renders a deeper sense of reality that surpasses the characters’ dictated stage performance (19). This argumentation is problematic because it presupposes the characters’ awareness of their theatrical nature, but in El cepillo de dientes this is precisely the condition that characterizes the dramatic action. In Díaz’s play, the characters’ participation in the game is underlined by an acute awareness of performance. In her opening monologue, Ella enthusiastically exclaims: “¡Es hora de actuar!” (“It is time to act!”) (77). The couple knows that their game unfolds in front of the
eyes of a watchful audience, which they directly address at specific instances of the dramatic performance. Therefore, following Moretta’s contention, we can understand the characters’ desire for a more authentic kind of experience as an attempt to overcome their scripted condition as fictional characters. Nevertheless, a more interesting perspective is to conceptualize the couple’s game as a violent force of verbal plurality and ontological mutability that necessitates an audience to achieve a heightened sense of reality and “exacerbated” experience.

In the last scene of the play, the characters quit their game as the stage suddenly begins to be dismantled. They complain that they did not have enough time to finish their game, but the walls are taken down, every prop is taken away, and the lights are turned off. Suddenly, “los actores parecen flotar en un ámbito incongruente y absurdo” (“the actors seem to float in an incongruent and absurd sphere”) (123). This incongruous and absurd space is one in which the characters can no longer continue to play. Their game requires a decisively theatrical space in which a watchful audience legitimates and bestows meaning to their impersonating actions. But in this nude and empty stage, their vertiginous game of experienced plurality loses its meaning and its exacerbating quality. For this reason, the interrupted characters can only proceed to continue their plain and quotidian lives: El quietly sits down and begins to knit and Ella plays the harp. Their heightened sense of reality has abruptly disappeared with their ability to perform.

This final scene is of great importance because it reveals the couple’s game as a paradigm of theatrical form. Huizinga contends that the form of play is significant because it conceptualizes a “certain ‘imagination’ of reality” (22). In El cepillo de dientes, the couple’s game is a fantasy of a dynamic space of action where they continuously rehearse the endless process of becoming. This distinct imagination vividly resonates with the particular details of theatrical practice. The couple’s actions resemble those of actors or actresses who systematically
role-play as they speak words and speeches of others. Díaz’s characters persistently engage in this vicarious practice to indulge in the form of performance. Their game is a means to vigorously explore the boundaries of self and experiencing the notion of otherness as a mode of perceiving a different subjective reality. This unremitting desire to dissolve into an imagined surplus of otherness, to become castaways in their own amusement park, ultimately reveals that their game is a violent impulse that essentially seeks to continually reinvent itself. This relentless force of innovation constitutes the lens through which we will now regard the play’s role in the theatrical environment of Chile in the early sixties.

An archetypal quest

The question about the role of theatre in Chile during the mid-twentieth century is a persistent one, which has primarily preoccupied theatre practitioners. It is important to note that this question was recurrently discussed in relation to the social configuration of society. The first professional theatre groups in the forties had emerged from the university milieu, and thus rendered the capital’s middle strata as the cradle of Chile’s modern theatre. The strong bond between the middle sector of society and the emerging theatrical groups intensified throughout the years and came to influence the development of Chilean theatre. It is necessary to have an idea of the country’s socio-historical development in order to understand the nature of this phenomenon. The election of Pedro Aguirre Cerda and his popular front government in 1938 initiated the so-called “estado de compromiso” (“compromise state”). This historical period marked the beginning of the middle class as a powerful social and economic agent. During the

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9 The compromise state is generally considered to have ended in 1973 with Augusto Pinochet’s military coup.
initial decades of the compromise state, the middle class became the primary administrators and beneficiaries of the education system (Núñez 6), and later acquired the political power to seek the expansion of social justice and a more equitable distribution of wealth (Rojo and Sisson 528). This presence of the middle sector within a more democratized social environment impacted on every aspect of the country, including the cultural scene. On the one hand, the social and political composition of the compromise state created an environment that stimulated cultural production and the development of the arts. It is thus not surprising that during this time Chilean theatre entered a revolutionary phase of modernization, its most productive and creative period. On the other hand, culture gradually became a social phenomenon that was no longer reserved exclusively for the upper class. The theatrical world became one of these democratized spaces primarily supported by the interests and economic ability of the middle class.

However, despite the positive social and economic developments of the compromise state, the transformation of the country had grave socioeconomic consequences. The country entered a phase of urbanization that left the unprotected rural population behind. Thomas E. Skidmore explains that “These ‘marginals’ were the tragic underside of capitalist urbanization in a developing country” (292). These “marginals,” to use Skidmore’s word, were the largest part of society and the theatrical world had little or no contact with it. The concern that theatre was limited to a particular segment of the population led various theatre makers to attempt to expand the social scope of their theatrical practice. One of these attempts was piloted by the TUC (Teatro de la Universidad de Concepción), which organized and produced performances outside of urban areas to try to develop popular dramatic expression for all Chileans (Pradenas 226). Despite serious efforts, the Chilean theatrical environment continued to be predominantly

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10 Some of the important cultural developments were the foundation of the National Symphony Orchestra and the National Ballet. Both organizations acquired great importance within the Chilean cultural scene.
attached, dependent, and relegated to the emerging middle class in Santiago. Therefore, the social transformation that had aided the development of theatre in the forties, turned into a serious concern in the fifties. Hans Ehrmann poignantly discusses the details of what the theatrical world understood as a crisis. In his article “Theatre in Chile: A Middle-Class Conundrum,” Ehrmann argues that in the late fifties Chilean theatre reached a burdensome time in its evolution because the number of productions was significantly decreasing and the authors writing these plays were unequivocally bourgeois and disconnected from the majority of the population. This led him to conclude a common view at the time; namely, that by the late fifties, theatre had lost contact with everyday life (80-2). At this critical moment of stagnation and social disconnection, Jorge Díaz enthusiastically joins the Ictus.

Díaz became part of the Ictus without any previous theatrical experience or training. He developed an early dramaturgy largely informed by foreign avant-gardist playwrights with whom he shared an avid interest in formal experimentation and innovation. El cepillo de dientes is the proof of this relentless formal quest. In his 1969 article “The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered,” Martin Esslin emphasizes that the playwrights he initially grouped under the concept of the Theatre of the Absurd did not share a defined ideological position, but rather a formal disposition:

What is far more important to the Theatre of the Absurd is the form in which this sense of bewilderment and mystery expresses itself: the devaluation or even downright dissolution of language, the disintegration of plot, characterization, and final solution which had hitherto been the hallmark of drama, and the substitution of new elements of form –concrete stage imagery, repetition and intensification, a whole new stage language.
The Theatre of the Absurd is above all a new form of the theatre that says some very important things about our time. (184)

Although Díaz repeatedly rejected the label of absurdist playwright throughout his entire career and life, it is evident that El cepillo de dientes relates to Esslin’s detailed description in more than one way. However, I am more interested in Esslin’s particular contention that the Theatre of the Absurd “says some very important things about our time.” Later in his article, Esslin discusses the archetypal quality of modern theatre in its ability to construct archetypal worlds based on the associative power of the poetic image (186-7). The couple’s game in El cepillo de dientes enables us to examine the archetypal dimension of Díaz’s play and its ability to comment on some very important things about its own time.

The characters game can be regarded as an archetypal model of reinvention invested in the vigorous quest for new forms. This energetic quest for formal renewal describes the enthusiastic project of theatrical innovation to which Díaz and the Ictus devoted themselves in the early sixties. More specifically, it describes El cepillo de dientes as a particular instance of dramaturgical inquiry and experimentation intended to advance theatrical innovation. The play’s space of exuberant dialogism and the characters’ complex game of exacerbation constitute formal modes of experimentation through which Díaz examines the basic dramaturgical elements of dramatic dialogue and action. Díaz’s careful study, however, develops through his experience as an integral theatre maker. During his early years, Díaz fully participated in the theatrical environment of the Ictus, working as an actor, designer, and administrator. His thorough theatrical background thus also enables us to regard his dramatic exploration in El cepillo de dientes as an enquiry about the significance of theatre, its developmental stage, and relation to the audience. In this sense, El cepillo de dientes is a dramatic world that critically thinks about
the particular condition of theatre in its specific context precisely because it strives for
dramaturgical renovation.

The couple’s frantic and pluralised game bestows the characters’ with a heightened sense of reality in which they find the enthusiasm to endlessly perpetuate their game. This acute sense of reality is also the impetus for Díaz’s dramaturgy, particularly, his attempt to connect with the audience and create an intense experience of spectatorship. Roman Jakobson in his discussion about realism in art, persuasively contends that the artist-innovator violates old forms and conventions to “present an object in unusual perspective” with the “desire for a closer approximation of reality” (40). Díaz uses experimental forms to develop this “unusual perspective” through which he leads the audience to confront serious questions about imagination and experience of otherness. These questions by no means constitute snobbish considerations exclusive to a hegemonic bourgeois discourse (Villegas 85), but instead reveal a profound concern for the crisis of social disconnectedness that afflicted the Chilean theatre of the time. The almost exclusively middle-class audience that visited the Ictus and other theatrical venues greatly preoccupied Díaz who notably desired to connect with a wider segment of the population. The restricted public that saw his plays radically contrasted with the plural social space of exuberance that his characters inhabit in *El cepillo de dientes*. However, it was precisely this dialogically profuse space of shared experience that Díaz envisioned for his theatrical practice.

In 1965, Diaz quit the Ictus and went into exile in Spain where he turned to a decidedly political and even didactic dramaturgy targeted to a wider audience. During this time, he wrote two important political plays: *Topografía de un desnudo (Topography of a naked man)* (1965) and *Introducción al elefante y otras zoologías (Introduction to the Elephant and Other*
Nevertheless, it is also during this overtly political phase from which he so vehemently denounced “las reaccionarias fórmulas del surrealismo ‘del absurdo’” (“the reactionary formulas of the surrealism of ‘the absurd’”) (1983 4), that Díaz writes his obscure one-act play *La orgástula* (*The Orgastula*) (1970). This play is an audacious experimental exploration of the limits of language. The entire dramatic dialogue is written in an inexistent language that Díaz invented following strict syntactical rules. The characters’ language, thus, has the form of Spanish but is utterly unintelligible. It is fascinating that the characters interact despite the semantic vacuity of their words. Their language remains dialogical primarily through intonation, suggesting that human interaction and the experience of the other lies beyond the semantic domain of communication:

HOMBRE. (*Con urgencia y levantando la voz*) ¡Blomio, pranzo y remoña!

MUJER. (*Con urgencia y levantando la voz*) ¡Tujo nafilero!

HOMBRE. (*Casi rogando*) ¡Befía, befía el popote!

MUJER. (*Desesperándose*) ¡Chivio!

HOMBRE. (*Duro*) ¡Tromia el cartajo!

MUJER. (*Casi sollozando*) ¡Nilia, nilia!... Oh, nilia!...

[MAN. (*With urgency and raising his voice*) Blomio, pranzo y remoña!]

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11 The definitive version of *Topografía de un desnudo* was published in Chile in 1967, but the play was first staged in Cuba in 1966. Critics generally consider it one of his best political plays due to its formal rigour and complexity (see Castedo-Ellerman 133-4). *Introducción al elefante y otras zoologías* was first staged at the Ictus in 1968 as a theatrical workshop. It was largely disliked by the audience and critics continuously comment it as a pamphletary and impulsive piece.

12 *La orgástula* was published in 1970 in the *Latin American Theatre Review*. It has never been performed.

13 An important precedent in Latin American literature is the use of “glíglico” in Julio Cortázar’s 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*). The “glíglico” is a similar made up language that follows Spanish grammar, morphology, and syntax. Horacio and la Maga, the two main characters, use it to recount an erotic encounter.
WOMAN. (*With urgency and raising her voice*) Tujo nafilero!

MAN. (*Almost begging*) Befia, befia el popote!

WOMAN. (*Getting exasperated*) Chivio!

MAN. (*Harsh*) Tromia el cartajo!

WOMAN. (*Almost sobbing*) Nilia, nilia!... Oh, nilia!... [82]

The unintelligible interlocutors of the play are a man and a woman who remain absolutely still in the middle of the stage. They are wrapped together with a cloth so that they appear to form a single body with two moving and gesticulating heads. They speak and argue in front of a six year old dressed up in clothes of the early 1900s, who is sitting quietly towards the back of the stage. At a specific moment, the woman emits a horrid cry and after a long silence the boy approaches the couple and slowly removes the wrapping cloth. Both bodies fall to the ground; they have mutually stabbed one another.

This intriguing experimental play speaks of Díaz’s permanent preoccupation for individual boundaries, togetherness, and the possibility of experiencing otherness. In the context of the Chilean theatre of the early sixties, this concern was for Díaz an undeniably social one. He yearned to create a theatre that could surpass the restrictive boundaries of class and provide a transcendent experience to a wide and heterogeneous audience. El and Ella’s plural game as a paradigmatic model of effaced limits and the experience of collective consciousness constituted the idealized social horizon that Díaz so fervently yearned to achieve. As his career progressed, Díaz more emphatically displayed an overt social engagement that rejected his early experimental plays for their purportedly socially-blind Europeanized and bourgeois forms. Notwithstanding, our analysis has shown that Díaz’s dramaturgical composition of *El cepillo de dientes* is a hyperbolic imagination of the form of human interaction in its multifarious social
exuberance. The characters’ game is thus dually archetypal in its ability to represent, on the one hand, the possibility of experienced otherness and, on the other hand, a relentless quest for inventive new forms. In conclusion, we can thus argue that Díaz, in a sense, never stopped emulating the couple’s game, always seeking new forms of expression through which he could lead a larger number of individuals into the transcendent and collective encounter of theatrical experience. Furthermore, this was also the path of the Ictus, which in the late sixties turned to the form of collective creation.
Epilogue
Álvaro Cepeda Samudio’s *La casa grande*

Figure 1. *Shibboleth*, Doris Salcedo, 2007, Photo.

© Tate, London 2012.
In October 2007, the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo inaugurated her exhibition *Shibboleth* in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern Museum. *Shibboleth* is a vast 167-metre-long fissure across the Turbine Hall that resembles the crack resulting from an earthquake and appears as if the very foundations of space were under threat. Disruptive and severe, Salcedo’s work prompts the viewer to physically confront the issue of crossing borders, and in fact resulted in 15 minor injuries during the first month of the exhibition (Lehane). The gesture of a Latin American artist cracking open the solid bases of a European museum is poignantly suggestive; the work reflects on social questions about division, segregation, and immigration.\(^1\) My interest lies in the aesthetic composition of the piece, which, in an interview regarding her exhibition, Salcedo insightfully commented: “…it’s a piece that is both in the epicentre of catastrophe and at the same time it is outside catastrophe. As you look in, you can see… you can get the feeling of catastrophe in there, but nonetheless, outside it’s… it’s quite subtle.” Salcedo’s conceptualization of *Shibboleth* as a piece that spatially relates to the idea of catastrophe speaks to radically violent aesthetics that perform serious critical inquiry. This critical aesthetics of violent configurations is precisely the domain I have attempted to examine throughout this study. It constitutes the fundamental characteristic through which we have considered José Triana’s *La noche de los asesinos*, Virgilio Piñera’s *Dos viejos pánicos*, Griselda Gambaro’s *Las paredes* and *El campo*, and Jorge Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes*. Furthermore, it constitutes the critical lens that will guide this epilogue and the overarching perspective through which we will conclude our analysis of Latin American theatre of the sixties.

These five plays, albeit in different modes, to different extents, and with diverse implications, are violent in their dialogue and dramatic structure, sordid in their dramatic

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\(^1\) The term “shibboleth” is a biblical reference to a passage in the Old Testament in which the belonging to a specific tribe is determined through the pronunciation of the word. The word thus establishes a certain authenticity on which exclusion, segregation, and racism are founded.
characterization, and disruptive within their own national theatrical contexts. Moreover, these powerfully violent traits render each play as a dramatic and aesthetic conceptualization of the troubling and uncertain times in which each of them specifically emerged. Triana and Piñera critically think about the historical vortex of the Cuban Revolution, Gambaro about the growing social and political violence in the Argentine context, and Díaz about the socially isolated development of Chilean theatre. Nevertheless, these five independent dramaturgical inquiries are governed by a similar sense of confusion and lack of understanding that hinders the characters’ clear judgment. The epitome of this condition is represented by the Young Man in Gambaro’s *Las paredes*. The Young Man is imprisoned, psychologically abused, and ultimately murdered without him ever discerning the true bearings of his unfortunate situation. Similarly, Triana’s enthusiastic siblings in *La noche de los asesinos* continually play out their murderous game in convoluted cycles that emotionally exhaust them and shatter their identity as autonomous beings. Triana, Piñera, and Gambaro’s dramatic characters fail to understand their surroundings and consequently fail to engage in meaningful and transcendent action, thus becoming torn and fragmented individuals who dissolve into the vertiginous violence of their dramatic world. In Díaz’s *El cepillo de dientes*, the imaginative couple wilfully dissolves into the exuberant space of plurality to transgress the limits of their own consciousness and pursue a horizon of meaningful existence. In all these plays, confusion, as lack of clear judgment and understanding, constitutes the crucial and unifying concept that describes the psychological and ontological state of the dramatic characters. It is from this standpoint that we will now focus on Álvaro Cepeda Samudio’s novel *La casa grande* (1962). We will further explore the notion of circumstantial and ontological confusion in the midst of crisis with the desire to finally conclude that the five plays constitute critical instances of Latin American dramatic and theatrical modernization that
synthesize multiple socio-historic, political, and cultural vectors, both local and foreign, into highly-sophisticated and markedly-violent dramaturgical structures that ultimately manifest in the characters’ inexorable sense of confusion.

I have chosen to conclude by analyzing Cepeda Samudio’s *La casa grande* because it is an important example of aesthetic territory of convergence. *La casa grande* is a crucial text that played a prominent role in the development and modernization of both the Colombian novel and Colombian theatre. It thus offers the possibility of extending our investigation beyond the dramatic boundaries of theatre through the specific case of Colombian literature where the modernization of both genres overlapped within the social and political context of national violence. This epilogue briefly examines *La casa grande* as an innovative text that primarily sought to conceptualize the country’s excessive political violence. I focus on the notion of ontological confusion in this novel in order to revisit the idea of the individual’s inability to comprehend and meaningfully act within vertiginous moments of historical crisis. My ultimate hope is to reassert that some Latin American writers masterfully synthesized and dramatized the sixties’ chaotic complexity into poignant and violently powerful plays.

**Contemporary development of genres**

There is no question that Cepeda Samudió’s *La casa grande* constitutes a landmark moment in the modernization of the Colombian novel. Raymond L. Williams contends that “The modern novel was inaugurated in Colombia with the publication of three patently Faulknerian works: García Márquez’s *La hojarasca* (1955), Álvaro Cepeda Samudio’s *La casa grande* (1962), and Héctor Rojas Herazo’s *Respirando el verano* (1962)” (48). These three novels followed the thematic exploration of violence that characterized the contemporary novelistic
production of the country, but did so through distinct formal innovations that conceptualize and aestheticize, rather than denounce, the problem of violence. The wide novelistic production of the forties and fifties that explicitly reflects on the country’s socio-political situation is known as the novel of the Violencia and critics often agree on its poor literary value (Arango, Williams). These novels, in many cases written by journalists, are governed by an urgent attempt to record atrocities they had witnessed, and so resulted in overtly-violent and demagogic texts. In a 1960 article, García Márquez comments that the novel of the Violencia was more of a brute testimonial impulse than an actual reflective exercise of literary creation. He maintains that these writers “no tuvieron la serenidad ni la paciencia, pero ni siquiera la astucia de tomar el tiempo necesario para aprender a escribirla” (“did not have the calmness or patience, or even the shrewdness to take the necessary time to learn how to write it”) (20). The particular composition of the novel of the Violencia evidences the narrative development that *La casa grande* represents. Cepeda Samudio daringly writes a novel about a massacre in which a massacre never takes place. This radical approach to the existing theme of violence is precisely what situates his novel as a crucial instance of modernization in Colombian narrative.

Cepeda Samudio was part of the prominent group of Barranquilla, whose narrative production “representa la maduración de la novelística de la violencia” (“represents the maturation of the novel of the Violencia”) (Mena 1978 98). The group was comprised of a small number of young *barranquilleros* –people from the Coastal city of Barranquilla– who gathered to discuss literature, film, soccer, baseball, and culture in general.² Some of the most prominent

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² There is much controversy about the composition and even existence of the group. Critics like Seymour Menton argue that the group was conformed by the prominent four figures immortalized by García Márquez in the last chapters of *Cien años de soledad*: Alfonso Fuenmayor, Germán Vargas, Cepeda Samudio, and García Márquez himself (ix). However, the members themselves contradict these view and sustain that either, in the case of Vargas, the group was an irregular gathering of a large number
names associated with the group are García Márquez, the Catalan writer Ramón Vinyes, and the
Colombian painter Alejandro Obregón. This group’s most important activity was probably
founding the literary-sports journal *Crónica*, in 1950. The journal published a short story in each
of its weekly issues with the objective of making their own work and the work of writers like
Ernest Hemingway, Jorge Luis Borges, and Felisberto Hernández accessible to the local public
(Vargas 126). Cepeda Samudio coupled this cultural activity with his own journalistic work as a
writer of *El Heraldo*. In his weekly column “Brújula de la cultura” (“Cultural Compass”), he
pressed for the renovation of Colombian narrative with groundbreaking advances like the pioneer
Colombian review of Julio Cortázar’s first short-story anthology, *Bestiario* (Menton ix). This
vigorous atmosphere of literary innovation was the cultural space in which Cepeda Samudio
wrote his one and only novel, *La casa grande*. He also published two volumes of short stories:
*Todos estábamos a la espera* (*Everyone was Waiting*) (1954) and *Los cuentos de Juana* (*Juana’s
stores*) (1972). Despite his early death, Cepeda Samudio left behind a revolutionary body of
work that broke with traditional ways of thinking and writing about violence. He created new
narrative structures that contributed to the development of an analytic and conceptual approach
toward both the literary and socio-political national landscape.

Cepeda Samudio’s *La casa grande* also played an important role in the development of
the Colombian theatrical scene. In the sixties, Colombian theatre entered a new phase of
development that is known as the new Colombian theatre. This new theatre, much like in Chile,
it was initiated by the universities. It was a markedly activist theatre that sought a broad popular
audience in order to protest against the government’s abuses and oppression (Arcila 68). The
government began introducing budget cuts to stall their theatrical production, but the young

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oblong of young men who informally met (126), or, in the case of Cepeda Samudio, that the group itself never
existed or designated itself as such.
theatre students continued their arduous work. They organized national festivals and renovated theatrical practices particularly influenced by the revolutionary ideas of Constantin Stanislavski. However, in 1965, when the Teatro Estudio de la Universidad Nacional—one of the most prominent theatrical groups of the time—staged Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo Galilei*, the American Embassy demanded they suspend their performances. The incident prompted the organizers to find independent means and spaces where they could freely develop their theatrical practice. In 1966, they successfully found the iconic Casa de la Cultura (House of Culture) (Ospina Hurtado 35).

The Casa de la Cultura was the first step toward the independence of a national theatrical movement (Arcila 75, Díaz Quintero 90). It set the ground for various other independent theatre groups that collectively led Colombian theatre into a mature period of professionalization. This phase is considered the peak of the new Colombian theatre. During this time, the serious technical concern of renovating theatrical forms was guided by an equally pressing social interest. Enrique Buenaventura and Carlos José Reyes, the two most notable theatre makers and theorists of the period and arguably of Colombian theatre, strived to develop a critical and self-reflexive theatre that confronted the masses with rigorous questions that could prompt the audience into a collective understanding of their own specific situation (Buenaventura 293). The social dimension of the new Colombian theatre stimulated an incipient national dramaturgy that produced a significant body of work predominantly focused on the theme of La Violencia.

María Mercedes Jaramillo posits that “The playwrights who lived through *La Violencia* felt the

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3 The arrival of Stanislavski’s ideas to Colombia is a highly ironic one. The dictator Rojas Pinilla realized the propagandistic power of the new medium of television and devoted some resources to its development. He hired the Japanese director Seki Sano to train national practitioners that would advance the television industry according to the government’s interests. However, Sano, a Soviet theatre practitioner and enthusiastic follower of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Stanislavski, focused on creating a national theatrical scene that would become a source of poignant and critical denunciation (Jaramillo 1992 81-2, Montilla 93).
need to bear witness to this dramatic era. Within their works, they analysed the causes and consequences of this brutality and protested the useless sacrifice of the Colombian people” (2004 25). Nevertheless, despite the marked social and political tendencies of the new Colombian theatre, this period also constituted a crucial moment of theatrical and aesthetic renovation. Claudia Montilla emphasises this argument by contending that the new Colombian theatre did not evolve merely through a social and popular impulse, but rather through a profound renovation of theatrical practices that redefined the notions of actor, director, playwright, audience, and theatrical space within the Colombian scenic arts (87). This perspective stresses that the new Colombian theatre was a critical instance of practical innovation that contributed to the creation of a critical and political consciousness.

This understanding of the Colombian theatre of the sixties strongly echoes the process of modernization of the Colombian novel. In June 1966, when the Casa de la Cultura was inaugurated, the symbolic act was officiated with the opening of the play Soldados (Soldiers). Soldados was a theatrical adaptation of the first chapter of Cepeda Samudio’s La casa grande; the adaptation was written and directed by Carlos José Reyes. The particular dramatic layout of the chapter, almost entirely composed by the dialogue of the two soldiers, lends itself to theatrical adaptation, especially since critics have repeatedly recognized Cepeda Samudio as a master of dialogue. However, the appropriateness of the text for theatrical representation surpasses its dialogical aspect and resides in its particular textual and contextual configuration. Jaime Díaz Quintero assertively explains: “Esta obra respondía a los conflictos político-sociales del momento y a la posición política de los hombres de teatro, como también, a una necesidad estética.” (“This work responded to the socio-political conflicts of the time and to the political position of the theatre makers, and also, to an aesthetic need”) (90). In this sense, Soldados
juxtaposes and synthesizes the simultaneous development of the Colombian novel and Colombian theatre. In the sixties, as we have seen, Colombian novelists and theatre makers sought new structures of creative production based on similar social interests and aesthetic concerns. They pursued the renovation of aesthetic–novelistic, dramaturgic, and theatrical–languages in order to advance a national social consciousness fostered through a historical consciousness and perspective. *Soldados* epitomizes this mutual novelistic and theatrical quest and therefore exemplifies Colombia’s cultural modernization.

The staging of *Soldados*, which marked the “acceso a la modernidad del teatro colombiano” (“access to modernity in Colombian theatre”) (Cajamarca Castro 86), opened up new channels of critical and creative practices that influenced the development of Colombian theatre in the years that followed. The version performed at the inauguration of the Casa de la Cultura was only one of the many versions of *Soldados*. Most of these versions remain unpublished since they constitute collective interpretations that stressed the play’s theatrical rather than dramatic component. Nevertheless, the most common and widely-staged version is the fifth one, written between Reyes, Buenaventura, and Jacqueline Vidal after a long period of historical investigation.⁴ This version stresses the political component through the explicit mention of factual and historical data –such as the names of American and Colombian political leaders, specific dates, budgetary figures, details of international conflicts, and constitutional entries, among others– intertwined with the soldier’s anguished dialogue. The data is delivered directly to the public, thus signalling a denunciatory and didactic intention that decisively differs from *La casa grande*, a space of historical and ontological confusion. Nonetheless, the value of

⁴ This is the only version that has been translated into English. The translation was performed by Judith A. Weiss, who also staged the play at the Windsor Theatre at Mount Allison University in February 2000. For details on the sociolinguistic and socio-cultural challenges of the translation and performance, see Weiss.
this version of *Soldados* lies in its pioneering role as a collective exercise of theatrical creation. Led by Buenaventura and his influential theatre company TEC, Teatro Experimental de Cali (Cali’s Experimental Theatre), collective theatre established itself as the principal trend on Colombian stages during the seventies. Moreover, critics continue to regard the theatrical and theoretical developments of Buenaventura, often compared to Brazil’s Augusto Boal, as the most outstanding case and period of innovation in the Colombian theatrical tradition.

The historical uncertainty of the Banana Massacre

The pioneering significance of *La casa grande* within the Colombian theatre and narrative establishes the historical importance of this text as one that paradoxically destabilizes and questions historical certainty. We will focus on the pivotal historical event of the narrative and the ambivalence through which it is narrated to understand Cepeda Samudio’s conceptualization of violence as a radical form that is intrinsically linked to the aspect of ontological confusion. The development of the Colombian literature of the second half of the twentieth century is unquestionably marked, if not determined, by the country’s infamous violence. This violence is simply referred to as La Violencia (The Violence), a name that refers both to a specific sanguinary period in the nation’s history (1948–65) and to the generalized state of social and political violence that has burdened the country for the last five decades. *La casa grande*, written in 1962, falls within the historical period of La Violencia, but the narrative itself centres on the Banana Massacre, a convoluted historical event that took place in 1928. In November 1928, over 30 000 workers of the United Fruit Company, an American company that controlled the banana production in the Magdalena department, went on strike asking for better

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5 Departments in Colombia are equivalent to provinces in Canada or states in the United States.
working conditions. The strike came to an end when the Colombian military intervened, defending the interests of the United Fruit Company; however, the details of the conflict’s resolution constitute a veritable conundrum in Colombian history. It is known that as the strike progressed into December, a large number of workers settled in the train station of the small town of Ciénaga –where Cepeda Samudio was born– and were met by a military commander who read an official decree that denounced their “incendiary” and “delinquent” actions. The government claimed that after the commander’s declaration the people peacefully dispersed, but the strong oral tradition of the region kept alive a more grievous version: the army opened fire against the strikers and killed a vast number of men, women, and children.

The uncertain nature of the event, in all its contradictory versions, displays an exemplary case of historical confusion where, in a spectacular interweaving of history and fiction, different disciplines, interests, and perspectives intersect. The critic Manuel Antonio Arango begins his discussion of La casa grande by denouncing the horrific actions of the army against the workers, followed by the remorseless cover-up by the governmental authorities. His accusatory words are grounded in the seminal speech that the populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán delivered to the National Congress denouncing the events of the Banana Massacre. This 1929 speech became the historical landmark that brought to light the massacre’s atrocious dimension, exposing the commander’s drunken state and the utter inexperience of his troops. Almost four decades later, Gabriel García Márquez reignited the debate with a single sentence that transformed the historical perception of the event. In Cien años de soledad (A Hundred Years of Solitude), José Arcadio Segundo assures that “Debían ser como tres mil” (“There must have been around three thousand”) (368). This figure suddenly became fixated in the national consciousness as the official number of casualties of the Banana Massacre. This figure was later substantiated when

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6 For a complete transcription of the speech, see Gaitán.
the national journal *El Espectador*, in 1972, published the official telegram sent by the American Ambassador in Colombia to the American Secretary of State, in which he confirms the death of more than one thousand strikers (Arango 78). Traditionally, the conflation of these three sources has been regarded as a genuine collective intent to reconstruct an alternate historical memory that countered the dubious official version. The words of Gaitán and García Márquez have thus been heralded as true bearers of historical accuracy. Nevertheless, recent investigations reveal that this simplified perspective fails to comprehensively examine and account for the complex and varied historical articulations of the Banana Massacre.

Jacques Gilard offers a historiographic perspective in which he stresses the prominence of the local powerful landowner families in the Massacre of 1928. He therefore challenges the notion that the United Fruit Company was a compact monopoly that controlled the entire banana production and single-handedly precipitated the infamous event. He advances his argument by focusing on *La casa grande*, which, as we will see, clearly illustrates the responsibility of the local aristocracy in the disastrous unravelling of the strike. Gilard’s critical perspective raises questions about the veracity of Gaitán’s passionate speech, in which he utterly blames the Conservative government for the massacre in their desire to please American gold. However, it is important to keep in mind Gaitán’s political position as a Liberal leader seeking popular votes to defeat the Conservative hegemony that had ruled the country for over forty years. In his memoirs, the union leader Ignacio Torres Giraldo hints at Gaitán’s political motivations by sarcastically recounting that the Liberal leader had virtually concluded the arduous investigation that supported his speech on his very first day of work because he had already decided upon its outcome (966). The revisionist perspective put forth by Gilard and Torres Giraldo is further supported by Eduardo Posada Carbó who calls for a more “balanced” and “less apocalyptic”
examination, one that does not centre on the celebration or slandering of heroes and villains, but rather on the complexity of historical processes (277). Posada Carbó argues that García Márquez’s legendary figure of the three thousand bodies has become the official version of the massacre and he warns his readers about the dangers of replacing history with fiction. Posada Carbó also quotes a recently televised interview in which García Márquez provocingly responded to a question about the Banana Massacre by stating that there could not have been more than three or five casualties in the event (251)\textsuperscript{7}. This bewildering response, which so categorically contradicts the legendary number uttered by José Arcadio Segundo, is seen by Posada Carbó as a definitive sign of the inaccuracy of fiction. Nonetheless, it also informs us about the absolute historical uncertainty of the event.

From this standpoint, let us focus on the short passage of \textit{Cien años de soledad} that has so famously shaped the historical perception of the Banana Massacre:

José Arcadio Segundo no habló mientras no terminó de tomar el café.
–Debían ser como tres mil– murmuró.
–¿Qué?
–Los muertos– aclaró él–. Debían ser todos los que estaban en la estación.

La mujer lo midió con una mirada de lástima. “Aquí no ha habido muertos”, dijo. “Desde los tiempos de tu tío el coronel, no ha pasado nada en Macondo.” En tres cocinas donde se detuvo José Arcadio Segundo antes de llegar a la casa le dijeron lo mismo: “No hubo muertos.” Pasó por la plazoleta de la estación, y vio las mesas de fritangas amontonadas una encima de otra, y tampoco allí encontró rastro alguno de la masacre.

(368)

\textsuperscript{7} The Colombian journalist Julio Roca performed the interview, which was broadcasted in England in 1990 by Channel Four. For a transcription of García Márquez’s controversial response, see Posada.
[José Arcadio Segundo did not speak until he had finished drinking his coffee.  
–There must have been three thousand of them– he murmured.  
–What?  
–The dead– he clarified–. It must have been all of the people who were at the station.  

The woman measured him with a pitying look. “There haven’t been any dead here,” she said. “Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo.” In the three kitchens where José Arcadio Segundo stopped before reaching home they told him the same thing: “There weren’t any dead.” He went through the small square by the station and he saw the fritter stands piled one on top of the other and he could find no trace of the massacre.] (Campbell 308)

José Arcadio Segundo’s claim about the three thousand bodies can only be regarded as an accurate figure if it is isolated from its dialogical context. His assertion is not only immediately contradicted by the woman and three other inhabitants of the town, but also by the reality of the stacked-up tables that indicate that a massacre has not taken place. García Márquez illustrates the abstruse nature of the event by overlapping multiple present experiences that cannot reconcile within a unitary and coherent account rather than by contrasting an experiential version to an official one. The passage thus suggests the ultimately complex and heterogeneous character of history, which hints at García Márquez’s surprising response in the interview about the three or five people that could have perished in the strike. This instance reveals that historical accuracy seems to be beside the point when the crux of the argument lies in the difficulty of integrating individual experience into a collective historical event and the challenge of constructing a definitive historical memory that respects the personal experiences of those intimately involved. Cepeda Samudio’s La casa grande is a text that masterfully explores the challenges and
contingencies of history; it displays historical crisis as an experience that is lived through with the highest degree of uncertainty and confusion. Our careful analysis of the text will reveal Cepeda Samudio’s novel as an archetypal model of the Banana Massacre understood as a historical conundrum that defies single and unambiguous assimilation.

La casa grande

Cepeda Samudio’s novel is about the Banana Massacre of 1928, but the narrative never describes the details or specifics of the historical event. Therefore, like in Greek tragedy, the violence occurs beyond the visual scope of the reader or spectator. The novel is divided into ten short chapters. Each chapter introduces a different viewpoint through which the personal experiences of various unnamed characters, all uniquely linked to the massacre, are recounted and exposed. The massacre is thus reconstructed through an array of diverse perspectives that intersect contrasting perceptions, experiences, and emotions. Williams sees this plural narrative structure as a Faulknerian device that the author uses to create a premodern and oral world which the novel’s regional and temporal setting evoke. Hence, in Williams’s view, the novel simultaneously incorporates the modern and the traditional (112). Although Williams’s analysis is overly concerned with establishing La casa grande as a predecessor of Cien años de soledad, his critical insight begins to reveal Cepeda Samudio’s novel as a heterogeneous space constituted by multiple intersections of worldviews and subjectivities.

The different viewpoints that construct the novel’s plural narrative pertain to three groups that are associated to the massacre in different ways: four chapters are narrated by members of a wealthy landowner family responsible for the strike’s violent resolution; four chapters are fragments of conversations held between the town’s inhabitants; and the first and most famous
chapter is a dialogue between two soldiers, riddled with uncertainty and guilt. We will begin by focusing on the town’s aristocratic family. Cepeda Samudio uses narrative devices that create a singular family with mythical dimensions. None of the characters have names, but are instead called by their familial roles, thus becoming types easily configured within a power structure. “La hermana” (“The Sister”), the novel’s second chapter, begins as a second person narrator formulates a question, immediately inscribing the narration in an ambivalent space. As readers, we do not know who the speaker is or to whom is he or she directing his or her voice. This ambiguous quality that governs the entire narration is linked to an important motif in the novel, the despised older sister’s empty eye sockets. This feature, on the one hand, augments her mythic quality as an Oedipal character who literally or metaphorically has lost the power of sight. On the other hand, it describes the condition of the reader who is daunted by the ambivalent narration and characters who cannot verily understand the violence that surrounds them.

The erratic narrations of the different members of the family draw a tormented map of fear and hatred that delineates the family’s convoluted story. The Father and Sister constitute the bases of the household’s tyrannical power. The Father is despotic and violent; he never utters a word but scars the Younger Sister’s face with a spur for dishonouring the family with an unwanted pregnancy. The Younger Sister has three children with an unnamed man that the Father murders, drags from a neighbouring town, and buries in front of their house for everyone to see. Nevertheless, there is a latent sense of incest between the Younger Sister and the Brother. The reader thus suspects that the Younger Sister’s offspring is also that of the Brother, which situates the Children as a force of resistance against the tyranny of the Father and the Sister. However, this is only one of the many possibilities suggested by the ambiguous and vague voices

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8 Both sisters are designated as “Sister”. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the oldest tyrannical sister as the Sister and to the other one as the Younger Sister.
that shape the narration. For the reader, as for the members of the family, everything is merely implied. The following fragment evidences the tacit agreement between the Sister and the Father through which their power is established:

No supimos cuándo decidió el Padre aceptar este hecho, ni siquiera demostró que lo había aceptado. Era un acuerdo tácito entre los dos, al que habían llegado sin decir una palabra, sin establecer condiciones. Un día debieron mirarse y en ese momento debieron pensar: Soy igual a él, no podrá dominarme, entre los dos manejaremos esta casa, y cuando él ya no esté la manejará yo sola; y el: Aquí está toda mi sangre, es como yo, ella tomará mi puesto, en ella puedo confiar. Y nada más. No hubo necesidad de decir nada. Quedó definido, establecido. La Madre lo supo también sin que nadie se lo dijera.

[We did not know when the Father decided to accept this fact; he didn’t even show that he had accepted it. It was a tacit agreement between the two, one they had reached without uttering a word, without establishing conditions. One day they must have looked at each other and at that moment thought: I’m just like him, he will not be able to dominate me, we will both control this house, and when he’s no longer here, I will handle it myself. And him: All my blood is here, she is like me, she will take my place, I can trust her. And nothing else. There was no need to say anything. It was set, established. The Mother also knew it without anyone telling her.] (51-2)

The pervading silence and secrecy that reign the wealthy household transform the text into an unstable space of interpretation where the characters are constantly guessing others’ action and intentions, and, consequently, their personal value and their role within the familial power structure. This is the case of the Children, who narrate the closing chapter of the novel.
The Children have grown up in another household with the Younger Sister, but, after the death of the Father, they are brought to the patriarchal household. The Brother interprets this event as a cruel and despotic move performed by the Sister to reinforce and prolong her power. In his view, the Sister feeds the Children the family’s food and impregnates them with the family’s smell to show them that they are all of the same blood, so that the Children can also grow to fear the Father and thus perpetuate the family’s hate (50). However, in the same chapter, the narrative voice imperceptibly changes to that of the Younger Sister who offers a different interpretation of the same event:

And this time the Brother brought them. And handed them over to you for you to raise and to make part of this family. And he stayed to see how they pulled out your eyes and defeated you. Because the Brother knew that any of your attempts to perpetuate the Father would fail. That is why he is simply looking at you. Not at them: at you. Waiting for you to accept that you are defeated: that you and the Father are definitively defeated.]

(59)

The contrasting interpretations of the Younger Sister and Brother illustrate the sense of instability that governs the family’s power dynamics. These two opposing views synthesize in the Children’s own perspective, that fails to acknowledge their inherited role or responsibility. The Children are aware of the Sister’s tyranny but do not know whether they have defeated her,
as the Younger Sister suggests, or whether they are there to perpetuate hatred, as the Brother maintains. The Children’s three voices intertwine in an accelerated dialogue that destabilizes notions of power and defeat. However, the voices do not manifest themselves as individual consciousnesses, but rather as fluctuating perspectives that oscillate between the certainty of power and resignation of defeat while commenting on their simultaneous dread and indifference toward the feeling of hatred. This personal disorientation that envelops the Children ultimately constitutes a state of ontological confusion that satisfactory manifests in the perception of individual failure. The Children thus conclude the novel with the following words:

–No sabría decir si es justo o no: era inevitable; eso sí lo sé: que era inevitable.

–Es que si no hablamos ahora nos va a llenar el odio y entonces también estaremos derrotados.

–De todas maneras estamos derrotados.

[–Sí: de todas maneras.

–I cannot say if it is fair or not: it was inevitable. That, I know: that it was inevitable.

–It’s just that if we don’t talk now, hatred will fill us up and then we will be defeated.

–We are defeated, in any case.

–Yes, in any case.] (136)

The Children’s self-perception of failure and defeat is the concrete consequence of their inability to discern their personal standing within a situation that surpasses their judgment and comprehension. In this sense, their condition represents the generalized state of confusion that defines the characters’ perceptions and experiences of the massacre. The only characters who carry no trace of doubt regarding their role in the massacre are the Father and Sister. They both participate in a trial in which they single out and accuse every one of the union leaders that were
later murdered or disappeared after the strike. The Younger Sister assertively reproaches her Sister: “Eras la única en la casa que sabía lo que estaba pasando” (“You were the only one at home who knew what was going on”) (52). Indeed, no one else, inside or outside the house, understood the true manifestations and perils of the strike. In one of the chapters narrated by one of the town’s inhabitants, a short scene unravels between one of the train operators and his wife. The man is getting ready to go and join the strikers while his wife reprimands him for getting involved. She blatantly asks him what their plan is and he honestly responds: “No sé” (“I don’t know”) (101). This ominous “No sé” pervades the novel’s entire narration and is the definitive sign of tragedy. The town’s inhabitants do not understand the particularities of the strike nor how it fits within the larger regional and national context of production and labour rights. Therefore, their marked inability to comprehend their individual relationship with the collective crisis, a consequence of complex socio-historic and political processes, is, in essence, the tragedy of *La casa grande*. In the novel the massacre never takes place, which means that no single striker is murdered in the text; however, the outcome is equally tragic because, like the Children, every single character has already and inevitably been defeated. The strike’s tremendous social and political dimension overwhelms the characters’ personal and subjective actuality and thus becomes a violent current that shatters every one of them.

Nevertheless, one of the exceptional traits of *La casa grande* is that this sense of subjective uncertainty determined by the abstruseness of crisis is most vividly experienced by the perpetrators themselves. The novel opens with a chapter titled “Los soldados” (“The Soldiers”), which is basically the dialogue of two young soldiers who talk as they partake in the mission to control the strike. As the chapter progresses, it becomes evident that the soldiers are unaware of the purpose of their presence in the zone. They have heard pieces of information that only
provide them with a fragmented and imprecise notion of their situation. For instance, they have heard that there is an ongoing strike, but the soldiers disagree on whether the workers should have the right to strike or not. One of the soldiers defends the striker, claiming that they should be respected as honest workers, while the other argues that if they are indeed honest workers then they should go back to work (12-3). Hence, one blames the workers for the strike, while the other one blames the company (28). However, this issue does not genuinely interest the soldiers; they are instead concerned about their own miserable situation. As one of them bluntly puts it: “No, a mí no me importa un carajo la huelga: es que estoy entumido y tengo hambre” (“No, I don’t care a damn about the strike: it’s just that I’m numb and I’m hungry”) (18).

The soldiers’ precarious situation explains their disregard for the crisis in which they are involved. However, a more inclusive perspective, that takes their social origins into account, sheds further light on their understanding of the event. Wet and exhausted, one soldier begins to chew tobacco to calm his unbearable hunger. He explains that they used to do that back home because there was never enough food (22). His comment reveals the harsh situation and poverty that he endured during his upbringing, which ironically stresses the soldiers’ aloofness towards the strikers, whose actions spring from a similarly deplorable social environment. The soldiers, however, march into the area with absolute indifference without even looking at the people or houses of the town. But this indifference is vehemently destroyed by their realization that they have become perpetrators, thus active agents who have the power to kill. At this point, the dialogue breaks and recommences after the massacre itself has taken place. Both soldiers are terrified of their own actions and utterly burdened with guilt. The strike no longer seems an alien and distant situation, but rather is their own visceral and most urgent condition. They have inserted themselves within the vortex of history and in that critical moment they cannot make
sense or measure the circumstances, but suspect its frightening dimension because of the emotional intensity, which they can only describe on a sensorial and corporeal level:

Con el cañón casi tocándole la barriga disparé. Quedó colgado en el aire como una cometa. Enganchado en la punta de mi fusil. Se cayó de pronto. Oí el disparo. Se desenganchó de la punta del fusil y me cayó sobre la cara, sobre los hombros, sobre mis botas. Y entonces comenzó el olor. Olía a mierda. Y el olor me ha cubierto como una manta gruesa y pegajosa. He olido el cañón de mi fusil, me he olido las mangas y el pecho de la camisa, me he olido los pantalones y las botas: y no es sangre, no estoy cubierto de sangre sino de mierda.

With the barrel almost touching his gut, I shot. He was hanging in the air like a kite. Hooked at the end of my rifle. Suddenly, he fell. I heard the shot. He unhooked himself from the end of my barrel and fell on my face, on my shoulders, on my boots. And then the smell began. He smelled like shit. And the smell has covered me like a thick and sticky blanket. I smelt the barrel of my rifle, my sleeves, and the chest of my shirt, I smelt my pants and boots: it is not blood. I am not covered in blood but in shit.

(34)

The sensation of nausea and revulsion expressed in the soldier’s description speaks of the guilt and culpability that tortures both of them. They proceed to try and comfort one another, claiming that they were ordered to shoot and, since they are trained to obey, they have no control over their actions. Moreover, since they desperately want to rid themselves of blame, they assert that it was not their fault, but everyone’s fault. Nevertheless, their erratic words reveal them as broken beings shattered by the violence and indomitable force of crisis. The soldiers, like the
Children, conclude their dialogue in an utter state of confusion that has the sole sordid certainty of their defeat.

**History and myth: two ambiguous categories**

In his famous introduction to *La casa grande*, García Márquez speaks about the novel’s ability to transform history into myth. He maintains that Cepeda Samudio teaches “a splendid lesson in poetic transformation” because although the novel seems historically arbitrary, it subjects reality “to a kind of purifying alchemy” that renders “its mythical essence” (xi). Lucila Inés Mena echoes this argument by contending that one of the fundamental traits of *La casa grande* is “la transmutación mitica de la realidad” (“the mythical transmutation of reality”) (1972 3). Nevertheless, as she develops her argument, her words seem to contradict her initial assertion. Mena posits that the novel unravels in two planes of meaning: a psychological one that explores the personal dimension of the members of the family and a sociological one that examines the collective scene of the town. In her view, the psychological plane of the family constitutes a mythical space of stagnation that symbolizes social decay. Hence, she concludes that the characters, who fail to free themselves from the oppressive and authoritarian household, symbolize the failure of a social order where people cannot to choose their own destiny and thus lead society into a self-destructive cycle of degradation (15). Mena’s argumentation ultimately reduces the novel to a social commentary that implicitly prioritizes reality over myth. García Márquez’s contention that *La casa grande* transforms history into myth and Mena’s interpretation that the novel illuminates social reality through myth comprise two opposing perspectives that constitute the novel’s masterful ambiguity. As we will now see, the novel’s
narrative structure suggests both possibilities by maintaining a latent uncertainty between historical and mythical worldviews.

Thus far, we have regarded the mythical dimension of the novel: Cepeda Samudio gives voice to vague consciousnesses that through imprecise memories and convoluted speeches divest the world of chronological order or factual accuracy. Furthermore, in the family, everything seems to have happened before and is potentially in the process of repeating itself. However, the fifth chapter of the novel, “El decreto” (“The Decree”), introduces a historical perspective. This chapter is an exact transcription of the infamous decree that the military commander read to the congregation of strikers before opening fire on them. The decree begins stating its place and date—“Magdalena, diciembre 18 de 1928” (“Magdalena, December 18, 1928”)—thus inserting a precise temporal element that disrupts the mythical dimension of the novel. Furthermore, as the fifth chapter of a ten-chapter novel, the decree constitutes the novel’s physical epicentre. The decree, as a historical document situated at the centre of a novel that in every other way avoids the specificity of the massacre, denotes the novel’s ambiguous and particular treatment of history. Roberto González Echeverría argues that the Latin American modern novel imitates the anthropological treatise in its attempt to “discover the origin and source of a culture’s own version of its values, beliefs, and history through a culling and re-telling of its myths” (364). His contention that the Latin American novel seeks historical origin and knowledge through myth is further developed by his proposition of the Archive. He identifies the Archive as “a special abode for documents and books” that is characterized by the presence of history and other previous mediating elements, such as legal documents (371). Through this characterization, it is possible to conceptualize the decree in *La casa grande* as an exemplary case of the Archive. Nevertheless, while González Echeverría contends that the Archive functions as a narrative
device that enables the Latin American novel to uncover historical knowledge through the retelling of myth, *La casa grande* does not point toward historical knowledge, but rather toward the precariousness of the personal experience of history.

In Cepeda Samudio’s novel, the Archive, or rather the decree, does not integrate into the mythical world to create an overarching narration. Instead, it remains isolated from the various viewpoints that speak of the massacre, and therefore transforms into one of the many versions of the historical event. The consequence of this relativization of history is that it deprives the decree of its objective validity. However, the decree stands at the centre of the novel and as such it constitutes the nucleus of all other narrations and interpretations of the episode. In this sense, the decree acquires the same ambiguity as the massacre: it constitutes an invisible epicentre evoked and suggested through every word and narration, but never fixated in concrete terms. The ambiguous quality of the decree shows that in Cepeda Samudio’s novel history acquires a mythical dimension through its simultaneous and contradictory timeframe. In the novel, the massacre is both on the verge of happening and has already occurred; as a simultaneously past and future event it annuls time and becomes an omnipresent continuity. The historical massacre is thus perceived as a mythic presentiment of violence that invariably afflicts every character in the text. However, the mythical dimension of history also reversely attributes a historical dimension to myth. Myth, as a constant imagining and remembering of the historical event, becomes relative, fragmented, and discontinuous. This simultaneous process that renders both history and myth as ambiguous categories constructs an unstable and disjointed text contrary to the coherent structure of a foundational narrative. But *La casa grande* probes a more visceral and precarious level. It speaks about the inchoate stages of history where personal perception, in all
its confusion and susceptibility, constitutes the only interpretative tool of apprehension that can begin to make sense of historical experience.

Interpreting *La casa grande* as an exploration of the subjective experience of historical crisis enables us to examine the novel’s relevance within its immediate socio-political context. Let us momentarily focus on this issue. In 1962, when Cepeda Samudio published his novel, the country was immersed in the sanguinary period of La Violencia (1948-65). This period symbolically initiated in 1948 with the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the populist Liberal leader who denounced the government for its role and complicity in the Banana Massacre. His death sparked an immediate reaction of outrage and protest that overflowed Bogotá’s streets – the incident is known as the “Bogotazo” – and soon spread onto other rural and urban areas, rapidly becoming an uncontainable wave of violence that swept the entire country. From this point, Liberals and Conservatives engaged in a brutal war of crimes and murders in which “massacre followed massacre” (Pearce 51). The intensity and gruesomeness of violence reached unprecedented levels that acquired the dimension of an undeclared civil war (Arango 14). By 1953, the government acknowledged that the situation was intolerable and both Liberals and Conservatives agreed that a military leader should overtake the government through a coup d’état. General Rojas Pinilla thus took power. While he initiated his mandate declaring amnesty, in the first year of his conciliatory regime more than 16 000 people were killed (Pearce 60). In 1958, the Liberals and Conservatives forced Rojas Pinilla to resign and joined forces to establish the Frente Nacional (National Front). For sixteen years, the parties alternated in power every four years, distributing all legislative bodies and public administrative positions among themselves and thus delegitimizing any other party or form of political opposition. *La casa grande* appears
in this inflexibly political context in 1962; as a result, a massacre perpetrated against a multitude of workers making demands to an implacable government is not in any sense alien or distant.

Regarding this version of events, the historian Gonzalo Sánchez argues that the current tendency of research and studies in Colombian history has focused on two specific historical moments: the twenties, a moment of ideological vigour in which a socialist movement of workers and farmers began to consolidate, and the sixties and seventies, a tragic moment where organized political resistance was repeatedly defeated by the bi-partisan government (219). Sánchez contends that in the sixties and seventies, as the student, worker, and indigenous movements developed alongside the guerrilla movement, “se proyectaban como el espejo de los años veinte” (“they projected themselves as the reflection of the twenties”) (222). This historical perspective enables us to regard the novel’s conceptualization of the experience of historical crisis as an insightful structure that also relates to the violent context of the sixties. *La casa grande* shows the confusing experience of ontological disorientation of those involved or somehow associated with the violent historical event in a way that it also illuminates the experiential vortex of La Violencia. The particular similarities that Sánchez points out suggest similar burdens and demands imposed on the historical subject in the twenties and sixties. Both decades saw a lack of democratic spaces to make social and labour demands, persistent isolation of rural areas, and blatant disregard for social development and progress. These deplorable circumstances deprived individuals of psychological and cognitive tools to envision and make sense of the complex social, political, and historical processes that enveloped them. Furthermore, the perpetuation of violence in the country (armed violence in the country has passed the 50-year mark) suggests a similarly precarious situation in which *La casa grande* continues to be a
relevant text.\textsuperscript{9} It is thus pertinent to comment that a significant number of recent works of fiction and journalism discuss the conflict as an absurd and senseless war devoid of ethical, historical, or broader critical dimensions for those who fight and endure it on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{10}

In this epilogue, I have chosen to conclude a study about Latin American theatre with the analysis of a novel. My intention has been to examine \textit{La casa grande} as a territory of convergence whose textual and contextual configuration speaks to the Latin American theatre of the sixties. \textit{La casa grande} explores and gives aesthetic form to an important historical event that has refused factual and objective fixity within the Colombian historical psyche. Cepeda Samudio emphasises the ambiguity and indeterminateness of the Banana Massacre to create a plural novel that shows the violence of historical experience from the individual perspectives of its disoriented characters. The novel constructs an inchoate world of fragmentary perception where the characters’ blurred vision and lack of clear and comprehensive understanding masterfully exposes ontological uncertainty at the core of historical experience. Furthermore, the key concept of ontological uncertainty becomes a diegetic marker of the multiple contextual elements that converge within the text. \textit{La casa grande} integrates historical and mythical worldviews into a narrative structure that makes both categories ambiguous and thus emphasizes the notion of experiential confusion. But this merging of perspectives relates to the novel’s national literary context of the time. The simultaneous development of aesthetic interests and social concerns in the Colombian novel and the Colombian theatrical scene situates \textit{La casa grande} as a paradigmatic instance of juxtaposition. From this perspective, this 1962 novel can be regarded as an epitome of the Colombian cultural modernization of the sixties.

\textsuperscript{9} Colombia is the country with the highest rate of unionist deaths; since 1990 more than 3500 union leaders have been killed (Hristov 118).

\textsuperscript{10} See Molano, León, Vallejo, and \textit{La vendedora de rosas}. 
This paradigmatic understanding of Cepeda Samudio’s novel enables us to conceive of it as a territory of convergence that is aware of the multiple worldviews, subjectivities, literary movements, and socio-historic and political issues that compose it. The novel thinks its literary, historic, and socio-political context through its own narrative structure of fragmented perception and convoluted judgement. In this sense, the novel resembles the five analyzed plays, by Triana, Piñera, Gambaro, and Díaz we have already analysed. As we have seen, these plays are complex instances of dramaturgic and theatrical development that explore tumultuous historical times of transition. In their unstable and plural dramatic worlds of elaborate games, absurdist plots, and disorienting experiences, they synthesize a plethora of dissimilar elements that respond to the specific socio-political concerns, aesthetic objectives, and pragmatic demands of the development of Latin American theatre during the sixties. Moreover, these sophisticated structures suggest an overarching aesthetics of violence that exercises critical thinking as it attempts to conceptualize the unintelligible, plural, and uncertain nature of crisis.

These violent aesthetics situate us, in Salcedo’s words, at the epicentre of catastrophe. Violence is thus revealed as a fissure, accident or spatial configuration that serves a critical and creative function. These playwrights’ works represent the epicentre of catastrophe because their critical conceptualization of violence is performed through the violence of form. This unique particularity of violence as an inquisitive structure signals that for these playwrights, violence, not only constituted a theme, but also a dramatic form, a thinking process, and a theatrical practice. Violence stands as a way to confront reality and telescope it into powerful nodes of experience that perform “the feeling of catastrophe” within and beyond the dramatic text. It is through their works that we can begin to envision and discuss the development of the Latin American theatre of the sixties not only as a creative process concerned with social and political
crises, but also as a crisis itself that experiences the manifold disorienting effects of violence and burdensome demands of history. In this sense, we can begin to bestow new meanings upon these avant-gardist plays, which in their own angst and quest for dramaturgical developments speak to the historical contexts from which they emerge.
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